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**The Social and Cultural Impact of the Car in Interwar Britain**

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**Submitted for the degree of PhD**

**in the Centre for Social History,**

**University of Warwick.**

**November 1995**

**This dissertation may be photocopied.**

## Contents

<b>Title Page</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Tables and Illustrated Material</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Key to Abbreviations</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>xi</b>
The Social History of the Car: Previous Work	xii
Technology and Consumption	xix
Sources and Methods	xxiii
 <b>Chapter One</b>	
Motoring, The Motor Industry and the Economic Historian	1
Introduction	1
Demand, Supply and the Diffusion of Car Ownership	4
Conclusion	16
 <b>Chapter Two</b>	
Who Owned Cars and How?	18
Introduction	18
‘By Their Cars Ye Shall Know Them’: Taste, Status and the Emergence of Middle-Class Motoring	20
‘An Old-fashioned but Powerful Prejudice’: Hire Purchase Reassessed	29
The Social Background of Car Owners Reappraised	42

Conclusion	51
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
‘The Right Crowd and No Crowding’: Uses of the Car - Its Utilitarian and Symbolic Value	55
Introduction	55
A Golden Age of Motoring or an Era of Privileged Consumption?	57
Conclusion	76
<b>Chapter Four</b>	
‘A Myth That is not Allowed to Die’: Gender and the Car	78
Introduction	78
Who Drove Cars? Men and Women at the Wheel	80
Femininity, Masculinity and the Control of Technology	85
Gender in Interwar Britain	87
Femininity, Masculinity and the Car	90
Manufacturers, Dealers and Gender	105
Conclusion	111
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
‘These Things will Right Themselves’: Discourses of Road Safety	114
Introduction	114
The Historiography of Road Safety	117
‘Outside the Brotherhood of the Road’: The Construction of Motoring Scapegoats	126
The National Safety First Association and Road Safety	131
The Emergence of an Ideology of Road Safety	136



Road Safety and the City: The Manchester Experience	155
Conclusion	164
<b>Chapter Six</b>	
Old England by Car: Dealing with a Contradiction	168
Introduction	168
Rural England: Image and Reality	169
The Car and the Countryside: The Motorist's Perspective	175
'Beauty Sacrificed on the Altar Of The Speeding Motorist': Preservationist Responses to the Car	182
'I am Nobody's Good Man for a Shilling a Night': Rural Antagonism Towards the Motorist	190
Rural Uses of the Car	200
Rural Entrepreneurship and the Car	208
Which Areas were Most Affected by the Car?	217
Conclusion	221
<b>Conclusion</b>	224
<b>Appendix One</b> Details of a Sample of Interwar Motorists	233
<b>Appendix Two</b> Drivers' Occupations as Reported in Selected Press Coverage of Accidents, etc	236
<b>Bibliography</b>	242

## Tables and Illustrated Material

### List of Tables

#### Chapter 1

1	Motor Car Ownership	5
2	Proportion of Net Earnings Retained by 'Big Six'	7

#### Chapter 3

1	Number of Private Car Licenses 1923-31	59
---	--	----

#### Chapter 4

1	Men and Women in the Professions, 1931	82
2	Women Drivers and their Access to Cars	84

#### Chapter 5

1	The Involvement of Motor Vehicles in Fatal Road Accidents: By Number and Percentage 1932 and 1933	119
2	Vehicles in Use 1919-1939	120
3	Road Fatalities 1926-38: Numbers and Percentage by Road User Type	122
4	Analysis of 100,000 Traffic Accidents: 1935-6	138
5	Gallup Poll on Road Safety, 1939	145
6	Average Fines for Motoring Offences, 1904-1938	151
7	Manchester Road Casualties 1922-1939	161

#### Chapter 6

1	Estimated Increase or Decrease by Migration (%): Census of 1931 to Mid-Year of Specified Years	204
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**List of Figures****Chapter 1**

1	Motor Car Ownership: 1924-38	3
2	Falling Prices of Cars	3
3	Annual Growth of Motor Car Ownership 1925-38	10

**Chapter 2**

1	‘By Their Cars Ye Shall Know Them’	24
---	------------------------------------	----

**Chapter 5**

1	‘Classic Motoring from Punch’	146
2	Persons Tried for Offences Against the Highway Acts: 1900-1933	149

**Chapter Six**

1	‘You Get More Out of Life With a Morris’	180
2	‘The Country Garage’	212
3	‘The Country Garage’	213
4	‘Who’ll Buy My Strawberries?’	215

## Acknowledgements

Many people have helped in the production of this thesis. My supervisor Jim Obelkevich offered numerous suggestions on how I might proceed with research and writing. Other members of staff at the Centre for Social History also gave advice, suggestions and encouragement and I would like to offer my thanks to Gwynne Lewis, Tony Mason, Carolyn Steedman and Nick Tiratsoo. I was fortunate enough to arrive at the Centre at a time when there was a very lively cohort of students there and I benefitted intellectually and socially from their friendship. I would also like to thank the Centre's secretary - Ros Lucas - for all the help she has given myself and other students over the years.

This thesis was completed whilst I was employed in the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Liverpool, where I was fortunate enough to be granted sufficient time to fulfil the task. For this I am grateful to Robert Lee and Henry Finch. Others in the department have read my work and offered valuable suggestions for its improvement. Garthine Walker and Andy Wood enter this category and deserve my sincere thanks, but my greatest debt of gratitude in this respect is owed to Andy Davies and Mike Tadman who have offered excellent advice on the thesis and much more.

I am also indebted to librarians and archivists - wherever my research has taken me - who have always proved helpful. I would particularly like to note the efficiency of Richard Storey and his staff at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

I am extremely grateful to Chris Reid who read the entire thesis, suggested many improvements and helped with tabulation. He also, very generously, gave up a weekend to oversee the printing of the thesis. However, my greatest debt is to Jill Greenfield whose love, support, intelligence, and cheeky wit have helped me get through the tortuous process of writing up this thesis. Jill, this thesis is dedicated to you.

## Summary

This study argues that society's choices between possible technological developments are highly reflective of patterns of political, social, and economic power. Employing insights from recent historical and sociological work on class, gender, consumption and technology the processes by which social relations shaped the design, marketing and uses of the car are explained. In turn, it is argued that the legal and physical infrastructure which developed in the car's wake were extremely expressive of class and gender relations.

The interwar years are studied because it was during this period, when the car as a technology was still open to contestation, that the British car culture was defined. This was so because it was during the 1920s and 1930s that car ownership became a reality for millions of middle-class Britons. An analysis of the symbolic, as well as the utilitarian, benefits of ownership is offered and reveals the car's role in the expression of social and gender identity. The extent to which these factors impinged upon the actions of car manufacturers and motor dealers is also related. This perspective and the use of oral evidence has unearthed significant new evidence about the composition of the motoring community.

The process through which influential sections of opinion reached a concordance with the car is explained. As it became increasingly useful for them, the professional and commercial middle-classes swung against significant restrictions on car use. Pre-1914 they were often outraged by the danger and inconvenience that were inevitable side effects of rising car ownership. However, once owners themselves they were increasingly attracted to new ideas about road safety which placed more and more emphasis on the education and segregation of other road users. The influential pro-motoring lobby manipulated these developments, a factor which is investigated here for the first time.

**Key To Abbreviations**

<b>AA</b>	<b>Automobile Association</b>
<b>ASC</b>	<b>Auxiliary Service Corps</b>
<b>CPRE</b>	<b>Campaign for The Preservation of Rural England</b>
<b>SMMT</b>	<b>Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders</b>
<b>UDT</b>	<b>United Dominions Trust</b>
<b>RAC</b>	<b>Royal Automobile Club</b>
<b>PEP</b>	<b>Political and Economic Planning</b>
<b>NSFA</b>	<b>National Safety First Association</b>

## **Introduction**

## Introduction

Next year, in 1996, Britain will celebrate a centenary of motoring.<sup>[1]</sup> This event will undoubtedly be recorded with the publication of a plethora of popular histories marking the car's benefits and achievements. This, therefore, seems an opportune moment to record the findings of four years of research, driven by a desire to offer rather more of a critique of motoring's evolution than has usually been the case. British social historians have largely neglected the history of motoring. Of those who have broached the subject the best have been weakened by an over-ambitious scope, seeking to cover a century of every aspect of motoring. The less rigorous studies have revealed an almost boyish enthrallment with their subject, which is misplaced in a serious academic study. This thesis will argue that the car must be viewed as a technology that was subject to contestation amongst a variety of social, economic and political factors.

The approach taken here is, therefore, motivated by a desire to overcome the problems found in earlier work. Although there is much still to say about the social history of the car in Britain, it cannot all be related here. Instead, the interwar years are the focus of the study, a choice made due to their pivotal role in establishing motoring trends and patterns which are still with us today. It was this period in which mass motoring became a factor in British society. By 1939 almost two million

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<sup>[1]</sup> The Locomotives on Highways Act of 1896, which removed the regulation requiring motor vehicles to be preceded by a person carrying a red flag, being identified as the midwife of motoring.

Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.



private cars were on the roads. Motoring was no longer seen as a luxury hobby for the rich: it was becoming a central part of many people's lifestyles in terms of work and leisure. This thesis tells the story of how this came to pass. It also sets that story, of developing technology, changing lifestyles and consumption patterns, within a broad understanding of the social relations which shaped these developments and were in turn influenced by them. In doing so it re-evaluates some questions, providing new insights into the debate about the diffusion of car ownership, as well as that over road safety and the car. It also examines questions about the car in Britain that have not previously been asked by historians. Discussions of the car and gender, the car and the urban environment and the car in rural Britain fall into this category.

In three sections, this introduction will explain the foundations on which this thesis is built. Firstly, it will acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of previous historical writing on the history of the motor car, both in Britain and in the USA. Secondly, it will outline the key themes that are addressed in the main body of the work. Finally, it will offer an assessment of the sources and methodologies employed during the course of the research.

## **The Social History of the Car: Previous Work**

Theo Barker's recent survey of the evolution of motoring research revealed a general paucity of literature, noting that historians have been slow to turn their attention towards the history of motor transport. Where they have done, the focus has often been upon motor car manufacture. Whilst company records and other sources

familiar to the business historian are relatively accessible the 'many-sided effects of the growing flood of motor cars as they poured on to the poor and limited roads of the early days posed a much greater challenge to historians; far more difficult to analyse and discuss'.<sup>[2]</sup> However, Barker's lament is principally one based upon the loss which has been incurred by transport history rather than by the wider historiography. He fleetingly comments, in a single sentence, on the road casualties which were the subject of intense public interest in interwar Britain, before proceeding to urge research into the historic role of the 'unloved lorry'.<sup>[3]</sup> With one group of historians endeavouring to write the economic and business history of the motor industry and another tending towards transport history for transport history's sake there have been few attempts to write a social history of the car. In Britain there have been only two studies of any depth: Harold Perkin's *The Age Of The Automobile*, published in 1976, and Kenneth Richardson's *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939* which appeared a year later.<sup>[4]</sup> As the first social histories of the car in Britain, both studies necessarily covered a great deal of ground in the interests of filling a gap in our knowledge. Important as it was to engage in this depth of coverage, the breadth of the studies is also a weakness, as too many issues are treated in too little detail.

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<sup>[2]</sup> T. Barker, 'Slow Progress: Forty Years of Motoring Research', *Journal of Transport History*, 14 (1993), pp. 142-165.

<sup>[3]</sup> *ibid.*, pp.154, 159-162.

<sup>[4]</sup> H. Perkin, *The Age Of The Automobile* (1976). K. Richardson, *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939: A Social and Economic History* (1977). All works cited were published in London unless otherwise stated.

Perkin's work suffers the most in this respect. Written to coincide with a television series, it was an attempt to cover a century of automotive history. In the course of his narrative the reader is not only informed of the social, cultural and economic history of the motor car and other motor vehicles, there are also chapters on the use of the tank in World War One and the aeroplane in World War Two. Clearly, such a vast survey inevitably leaves little room for either the detail or analysis which must form part of any historical endeavour.

Concentrating on a shorter period than Perkin, Richardson's study nevertheless suffers from its attempt to be all-embracing, providing a number of empirically detailed surveys of different aspects of the car's history. Chapters offer coverage of the pre-history of the car, specialist manufacturers, the American challenge, the popular car and volume production, motor racing, sports cars, the arrival of middle-class motoring, before climaxing with a study of the petrol companies, garages and motor-car distribution. As his preface indicates, Richardson's intent was to write about the people who 'made the British motor industry'.<sup>[5]</sup> In doing so it is clear that the anticipated readership for the book included a public interested in the minutiae of the motor car's history as well as an academic readership. This in part explains what amounts to a heroic portrayal of events and personalities in Richardson's account. This is particularly true in the case of the two chapters which appear on the subject of motor racing and sports cars, whereas coverage of the everyday user of the car is allotted only one chapter. Thus, Richardson's version of events is filled with positive, resourceful men: it is a world of impressive inventors, engineers, manufacturers and racing drivers. Even relatively unglamorous figures,

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<sup>[5]</sup> Richardson, *The British Motor Industry*, preface.

such as William Letts and Charles Jarrott, motor-car importers and founding members of the Automobile Association (AA) are lauded; for Richardson they were of 'that excellent breed which establishes committees and gets the business of the world done'.<sup>[6]</sup> To summarise Richardson's contribution it would be necessary to conclude that he provided a good deal of empirical evidence, but failed to situate his narrative within wider historical events or identify the possible historiographical significance of much of what he found.

Perhaps because of an over reliance on the motoring trade press as a source, buttressed in Richardson's case by a number of interviews with retired trade figures, both studies exude a sense that all developments within motoring were teleologically driven. Both carry little sense of the notion that technology is a social construct, developments being dictated by cultural and political factors as much as by technical necessity or scientific discovery. For example, neither include an assessment of why fewer women have had driving licences than men, presumably because it was not an issue which exercised the early motoring establishment. Furthermore, in offering scant analysis of the role of pro-motoring lobbyists, they fail to explain the means by which society moved towards the concordance with the car that established it as the central form of transport in the UK. If the function of history is to explain such historical phenomena, both Richardson and Perkin fail in this respect.

In fact it is necessary to look outside of historical writing to find work that does tackle some of the issues that Perkin and Richardson either skirt or miss entirely. Of most significance is William Plowden's impressive study *The Motor Car*

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<sup>[6]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

*and Politics in Britain* which was first published in 1971.<sup>[7]</sup> Covering the period from 1896 to 1970 Plowden chose to concentrate exclusively on the development of government attitudes towards the car, producing a detailed exposition of the growing importance of the car in British society. A former journalist and civil servant who became a lecturer in government at the London School of Economics, Plowden provided an informed interpretation of the competing claims of the various interest groups that influenced government policy towards motor transport. The most instructive sections of the book are those that deal with the period up to 1939, his access to government papers being limited after that date. Plowden's account provides a useful antidote for those studies which are less rigorous in their analysis of this process. He provides an illuminating insight into developing attitudes towards the car within government and the civil service. In particular, he highlights the role that the motoring lobby were able to secure for themselves as advisors to the government on every aspect of road transport. Chapter Five of this thesis will continue Plowden's analysis of the debate over road safety, providing significant new evidence about the extent of the road lobby's influence in this area. In the process I shall question the most recent contribution in this area, which was offered by Clive Emsley.<sup>[8]</sup>

The lack of work on the social history of the car in Britain, from which to draw inspiration, is at least partially off-set by the amount of material available

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<sup>[7]</sup> W. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics in Britain* (Bungay, 1973). References to Plowden throughout this thesis will be to this 1973 Pelican edition.

<sup>[8]</sup> C. Emsley, "'Mother, what did policemen do when there weren't any motors?' The law, the police and the regulation of motor traffic in England, 1900-1939', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 357-381.

covering the American experience. However, there too the earliest work on the history of the automobile has recently been diagnosed as suffering from the same technological determinism that marks work in Britain. Thus, the work of pioneers, such as John B. Rae and James J. Flink, has been accused of describing the automobile's progression as logical and inevitable.<sup>[9]</sup> Flink has recognised this himself and has been amongst those who have begun to probe the deeper implications of mass car ownership for American history. In his case personal tragedy, the death of a niece who was killed by a car in 1971, prompted a more complex critique of the automobile in the American past.<sup>[10]</sup> The strongest theme in Flink's later work has been an identification of what he describes as the three stages of American automobile consciousness, which are still presented as very much part of a teleological process. The first period is described as that between the car's introduction and the opening of Ford's Highland Park plant in 1910. Flink argues that this period was marked by the development of attitudes and institutions that made the domination of the car inevitable. The second stage, from 1910 to the late 1950s, is described as marked by a mass idolisation of the car, institutions and lifestyles being totally accommodated to the car. The third stage, from the late 1950s, witnessed rising doubts about the

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<sup>[9]</sup> C. McShane, *Along the Asphalt Path*, pp. x-xi. The approach criticised is that offered in J. B. Rae, *The American Automobile: A Brief History* (Chicago, 1965), J. B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass: 1971) and J.J. Flink, *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895-1910* (Cambridge, Mass: 1970).

<sup>[10]</sup> His reappraisal began in 1972 with J.J Flink, 'Three Stages of American Automobile Consciousness', *American Quarterly*, 24 (1972), pp. 451-473. It continued in Flink, *The Car Culture* (Mass., 1975) and Flink, 'The Car Culture Revisited: Some Comments on the Recent Historiography of Automotive History' in D.L. Lewis and L. Goldstein (eds), *The Automobile In American Culture*, (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983), pp. 405-417.

car: it was no longer seen as an historically progressive force for change.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, in spite of a re-evaluation of his earlier work Flink still has a tendency to see the early history of the automobile in an uncomplicatedly positive perspective.

More recently a younger generation of social historians has offered a re-evaluation of the car's history, providing new insights into its role in early twentieth century America. Rather than having a history revolving entirely around individual liberty and mobility, it is clear that the design, marketing and uses of the automobile were often shaped by considerations of class, race and gender. The literature is growing and offering history of an increasingly ambitious and sophisticated nature. Howard L. Preston's study of Atlanta analyses the effect of growing car ownership on the largely car-less black population. For them the automotive age increased their social and residential isolation, the car allowing more prosperous whites and the smaller middle-class black community to retreat to the new suburbs outside Atlanta.<sup>[12]</sup> Virginia Scharff has highlighted the gender-blindness of earlier work, producing a fascinating study revealing gender's centrality in the early American car culture.<sup>[13]</sup> More recently, Clay McShane has produced an account of how America reached a concordance with the car that in many ways parallels the approach that will be taken in this thesis. Beginning by posing the question of whether the automobile as a technology could have been banned or rejected, he finds that the answer is yes.

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[11] Flink, 'Three Stages of American Automobile Consciousness', pp. 451-2.

[12] H.L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935* (Athens, Ga., 1979).

[13] V. Scharff, *Taking The Wheel: Women And The Coming Of The Motor Age*, (New York, 1991).

At the heart of its development lay the realities of social relations in turn of the century America. As he writes:

The automobile triumphed because it was more than just a form of travel. Rapid acceptance grew, not just out of mechanical superiority, but the motor car's application as a status object and symbol of liberation. The new machines cannot be evaluated just as a technology or another new transportation mode.<sup>[14]</sup>

This insight, and others offered by recent American work, have helped many of the theoretical and methodological decisions taken during the course of research for this thesis. Indeed, just as the recent American literature has been written in part as a reaction to earlier work, so this thesis is also in part the product of a similar response to the shortcomings of earlier enquiries in Britain. The research has also been influenced and guided by interest in a number of issues, two of which reappear throughout the thesis.

## Technology and Consumption

First and foremost this thesis has been influenced by the new sociology of technology, best exemplified in the work of Judy Wajcman.<sup>[15]</sup> This approach offers a critique of the technological determinism of previous sociological and feminist coverage of technology. Rather than simply considering the effects of technology on society it also examines the effects of society on technology. This approach is a highly appropriate one for this study, given the nature of the previous historiography, which

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<sup>[14]</sup> C. McShane, *Along the Asphalt Path*, pp. x-xi.

<sup>[15]</sup> J. Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Oxford, 1991). D. MacKenzie and J. Wajcman (eds), *The Social Shaping of Technology* (Milton Keynes, 1985).



was largely concerned with mapping the car's impact on any number of aspects of our lives without asking questions about how notions of class, gender or other factors might have influenced the car's technological development in the first place. The first aim of this thesis, therefore, is to provide a new perspective on the car's history, identifying its dialectical relationship with social relations such as those of class and gender. In exploring this perspective a greater sense of the contingency that surrounded the development of motoring will emerge.

In offering this analysis, of the car's involvement in class and gender relations, it is necessary to offer appreciation of the true complexity of those issues. For example, it is necessary to understand the extent of intra-class differences that were such a feature of the British middle-classes in the interwar period, as well as recognising the extent to which their interests could coalesce around aspects of the car's consumption. An example of the former will be seen in the reaction of some of the earliest and wealthiest upper-middle-class motorists to the expansion of motoring amongst the middle classes as the period wore on. An example of the latter will be seen in the common opposition of motorists to suggestions designed to limit the freedom and mobility offered to them by car-ownership. The first of these two examples would affect the technological development of the motor car by laying tremendous importance on the distinction between cars, creating an industry that built a high number of models for different market niches. The second example influenced the technological development of the car in terms of ensuring its achievement of an hegemonic position in transport policy. It will be argued that in this case the interests of middle-class motorists merged with those of manufacturers and commerce to

remould the urban and legal infrastructure in such a fashion that the car often shaped them rather than being shaped by them.

Consumption is the second major theme which runs throughout the thesis. Again, issues surrounding consumption are often posited around an analysis of class and gender relations, as the car provided a new forum for the expression of class and social status, masculinity and femininity. Once more the approach taken offers new perspectives on several issues previously examined by historians as well as providing insights into historical phenomena that have not been acknowledged by those historians.

In analysing the debate about the diffusion of car ownership, the work of the significant economic and business historians in the field will be acknowledged. In particular Sue Bowden and Paul Turner's recent econometric analysis of the diffusion of motor cars will be reappraised. Oral evidence will be revealed which suggests that any evaluation of the spread of car ownership must take into account the ability of consumers to restructure family finances and spending patterns in order to purchase a sought-after commodity. The oral evidence therefore makes possible a new methodological approach in the study of the diffusion of car ownership. As valuable as recent economic studies have been, any understanding of consumption and the diffusion of consumer durables must also address the symbolic dimension of the world of goods which is such a strong feature of more culturally inclined studies. In this aspect of the thesis the writings of Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu have been influential in suggesting avenues of thought.<sup>[16]</sup> Douglas' *The World of Goods*

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<sup>[16]</sup> M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *World of Goods* (1980).  
P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, (Oxford, 1992). Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1986).

provides an interesting critique of the assumptions economists make about consumption. In particular, she calls for greater weight to be given to the 'metaphorical understanding' of goods. It is only through this approach that 'we can come to a more accurate idea of why consumers buy goods'.<sup>[17]</sup> In particular the notion of the rational individual commonly used in economic explanations of consumption is an 'an impossible abstraction from social life'. Furthermore it is 'absurd to aggregate millions of individuals buying and using goods without reckoning with the transformations they effect by sharing consumption together'.<sup>[18]</sup> Goods make physical visible statements about the hierarchy of values subscribed to by their owner and they are read by those who know the code and scan them for information. Bourdieu also argues that the structure of consumption is the key to the reproduction of class relations and that it provides a mechanism by which social relations can be analysed. Bourdieu places less emphasis on goods as such, preferring instead to concentrate on cultural capital and its expression in terms of taste. The perspectives offered by Douglas and Bourdieu provide a a useful framework from which to seek an understanding of the car and middle-class consumption in interwar Britain. Douglas' work is most appropriate when considering econometric analyses of the diffusion of private cars. Bourdieu's concepts are of greater heuristic value when considering the uses to which cars were put. His empirical work on middle-class consumers has also highlighted the importance of recognising the intricate distinctions that can be made in the consumption process.

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<sup>[17]</sup> Douglas and Isherwood, *World of Goods*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>[18]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

Several historians have recognised the heterogenous nature of the middle classes during this period, but this is the first attempt to establish the impact of that social diversity on the design, sales and uses to which the car was put in this period.<sup>[19]</sup> The polymorphous nature of the middle classes was not only due to income or occupational differences but was also largely the result of carefully contrived distinctions that revolved around virtually every area of middle-class lifestyle. It will be suggested that the car as a very visible artefact became integral to the arena of middle-class distinction. As such the consumption of the car must be analysed in all its aspects, from the type of car chosen to how it was paid for to how and when it was used.

The thesis itself does not separate the discussion of technology from that about consumption: the two are intertwined throughout this analysis of the development of motoring and the motor car in interwar Britain. The two are also inevitably subject to the influence of social relations and an effort is made throughout to explain this process.

## Sources and Methods

The sources and methods employed during the course of research will be familiar to most social historians. Oral history was employed and provided significant new insights into several aspects of the study. Although Richardson had conducted

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<sup>[19]</sup> R. Samuel, 'Middle Class Between The Wars', *New Society*, January - June, 1981. A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991). A.A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950*, (1991).

interviews during the course of his research, they were largely with industry figures who provided little information that could not be gleaned from the contemporary trade press. The purpose of interviewing was to elicit information on the car's role in the lives of ordinary motorists, rather than racing drivers, manufacturers and others.

Interviewees were found after a series of letters were published in local newspapers, car club magazines and women's magazines. Women's magazines were approached when the first two outlets provided an almost entirely masculine response. The letter contained a simple appeal for information on the social and cultural impact of the car in interwar Britain. Total replies stand at just over fifty, the last reply arriving in September 1995, almost four years after the initial appeal.

Constructing a sample of interviewees proved difficult for a variety of reasons. To begin with it was not abundantly clear which social groups owned cars in interwar Britain. Previous assessments had followed the contemporary view, posited by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT), that car ownership was exclusively the preserve of the rich, professionals and the commercial middle-classes. However, such assessments were primarily grounded on calculations based on the new car market. Many of the people who wrote to me did not seem come from the type of family background that might have been expected, at least until it became clear that many of them came from families who had owned second-hand cars. At this point it became clear that a proportion of interviewees should emanate from working-class as well as middle-class backgrounds.

A total of fourteen correspondents were selected for interview; of these one requested that the interview was not recorded and three recordings proved to be of very poor quality and have not been transcribed. A total of ten recorded and one

unrecorded interview therefore provided the oral-historical information which directed much of the subsequent areas of research. Interviews analysed are those with seven men and four women who either owned their own car sometime between 1918 and 1939 or came from a family that did. They originate from various regions of England and from a variety of backgrounds. The great majority fitted the accepted profile of interwar motorists, having either professional or commercial associations. However, others seemingly had no such connections and were of interest for that reason.

The interviews were conducted at an early stage of the research, and at that time were concerned less with gathering quantitative evidence of experiences than with understanding how those interviewed felt about their experiences and how they interpreted and represented them in the present. Interviews were therefore essentially unstructured, although there were obviously a set of areas that I was seeking to explore with each interviewee.<sup>[20]</sup> In following this approach, I was keen to allow interviewees to construct their own tale, the fashion of the tale's telling being of as much interest as the events contained therein. Thus, as well as being told of events that had occurred in the interviewee's life, I also experienced several examples of motoring myth and folklore related as part of the personal history of the teller.

Of course there were aspects of each interview which enabled quantification to take place. Furthermore, analysis of the letters of respondents not interviewed allowed quantification of a number of issues. It was possible to establish the social

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<sup>[20]</sup> This methodological and theoretical approach was influenced by a reading of S.B. Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (New York, 1991) and A. Oakley, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms', in Helen Roberts (ed), *Doing Feminist Research* (1990).

classes of correspondents, whether they bought new or second-hand cars and how they paid for them. Where necessary, clarification was sought through further correspondence. Towards the end of the research period Quicks Ltd, a Manchester-based Ford dealership, were able to provide a database of pre-war motorists and several were kind enough to fill in a questionnaire, offering further quantifiable data. Thus the response to appeals for oral evidence has produced testimony from thirty eight individuals.<sup>[21]</sup> From their information it has been possible to draw up class and occupational profiles of thirty six interwar motorists.

Other sources have proved extremely fruitful. A wide range of motoring journals were consulted and are analysed in the thesis from a perspective not previously used by a British historian of the car. This is particularly true of the analysis of their role in the formation of gendered notions around motoring and the car. Every issue of the *Autocar* between 1918 and 1939 has been consulted, its great rival the *Motor* also received extensive appraisal. Journals of individual marques and manufacturers were also informative. Those consulted included *Morris Owner*, *Austin Advocate* and *Ford Dealer* - articles, readers letters and the advertising placed in them all proving useful. The trade press of the motor industry revealed a great deal about selling methods, design and the embryonic state of marketing policy.

Believing Richardson and Perkin's studies to have suffered due to an over-reliance on motoring journals a decision was taken to establish attitudes to the car in a number of periodicals. Consultation of such sources also helped sharpen an understanding of the material factors and social relations that shaped interwar Britain.

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<sup>[21]</sup> This number comprises 11 interviewees, 13 letter writers and 14 respondents to questionnaires.

understanding of the material factors and social relations that shaped interwar Britain. A reading of *Advertiser's Weekly* revealed that the motor industry was not alone in the extent to which its approach to marketing was influenced by traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. This journal also provided an insight into the changing nature of consumption in the decades between the wars. *Farmer's Weekly* provided evidence, from a rural perspective, on the impact of the car in the countryside, often offering a vastly different tone than that of the more critical rural preservationists. Other sources highlighted the animosity the car could cause amongst some middle-class groups. The *British Boarding House Proprietor and Private Hotelier* conveyed the anguish and annoyance experienced by many in the commercial classes who had previously relied on a less mobile middle-class clientele.

National and local newspapers were extensively surveyed for evidence of changing attitudes towards the motor car. It is argued that there were very definite changes in press attitude, and the probable causes of this process are identified. Newspapers also carried reports of motor accidents, thefts and subsequent inquests or court cases; occasionally this coverage revealed occupational details about drivers. It has therefore been possible to collate further data on the social composition of the motoring community from this source, the occupation of one hundred and sixty drivers being identified.

The archives and publications of a variety of pressure groups have also been consulted. The Automobile Association (AA) and Royal Automobile Club (RAC) published copious material and have significant archives, whilst the records of the Pedestrians' Association often placed a different interpretation on events. In consulting the archives of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (records



not used previously by historians of the car) it was possible to offer significant new evidence on the nature of the road safety debate in interwar Britain, revealing more about the role of the motor manufacturers in that process than their own generally patchy records do. The enlightening records of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) have proved invaluable in identifying areas of concern about the impact of motoring on the countryside as seen from a particular perspective.

Official publications have been a source of statistical evidence as well as providing further examples of the class or gendered perspective seen in many other sources. Those consulted include *Hansard*, Royal Commissions on the motor car and transport, as well as a variety of more narrowly-focused government-sponsored reports. The records of various government departments have also been trawled where appropriate.

Literature has also proved a fruitful informant. Motoring literature, such as tour guides or novels centred on the car, has proved enlightening in revealing the tastes and sensibilities of the middle-class motoring public. More generally literary sources have revealed evidence of a variety of possible responses towards every aspect of motoring.

It will be argued that a reading of these sources indicates the extent to which the car as a technology was subject to contestation by a variety of cultural and economic factors. Whether the issue is the proliferation of models in the 1930s, the limited number of women drivers, or the struggles fought over motoring legislation, every aspect of the car's consumption was greatly influenced by ideologies of class and gender.

## **Chapter One**

### **Motoring, the Motor Industry and the Economic Historian**

## Introduction

In a recent article Frank Mort and Peter Thompson offered a useful critique of much historical writing on the topic of consumption.<sup>[1]</sup> They maintain that although arguments about the precise nature of the term vary considerably one common feature is the tendency of historical work on consumption to polarise either around economic or cultural models. Consequently, economic approaches often fail to address the symbolic dimension of the world of goods which have been such a strong feature of the more culturally inclined studies, whereas the latter approach often results in a propensity to overgeneralise, with consumption employed as a 'meta-concept' which is believed to explain a disparate set of historical phenomena. Mort and Thompson's solution to this methodological dilemma was to embark on a sectorally specific approach, examining the relationship between Burton's and their male consumers. At the same time they also endeavoured to maintain a dialogue with the wider debates on consumption, in particular striving to address questions of social status, taste and the commercial orchestration of consumption. A similar approach will be taken in this thesis.

Recent work on the diffusion of motor car ownership between the wars has been extremely enlightening, offering valuable insights into the nature of the market, the economic conditions within which manufacturers operated and the different

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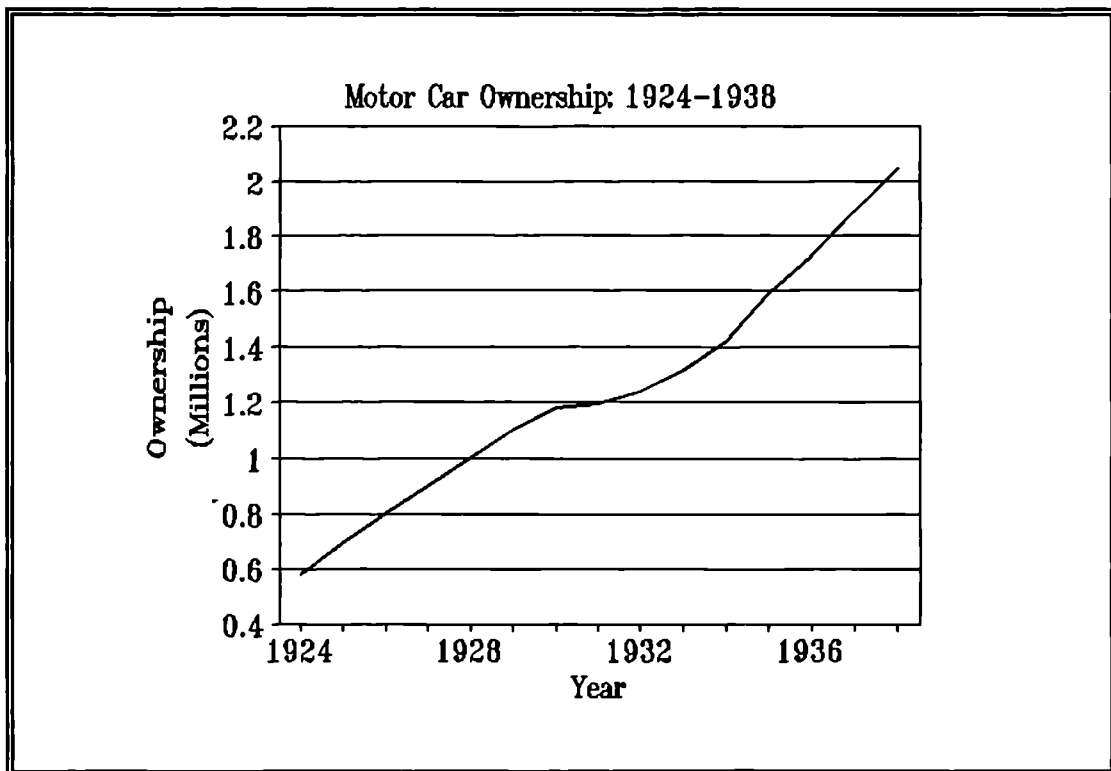
<sup>[1]</sup> F. Mort and P. Thompson, 'Retailing, commercial culture and masculinity in 1950s Britain: the case of Montague Burton, the "Tailor of Taste"', *History Workshop*, 38 (1994), pp. 106-127.

Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

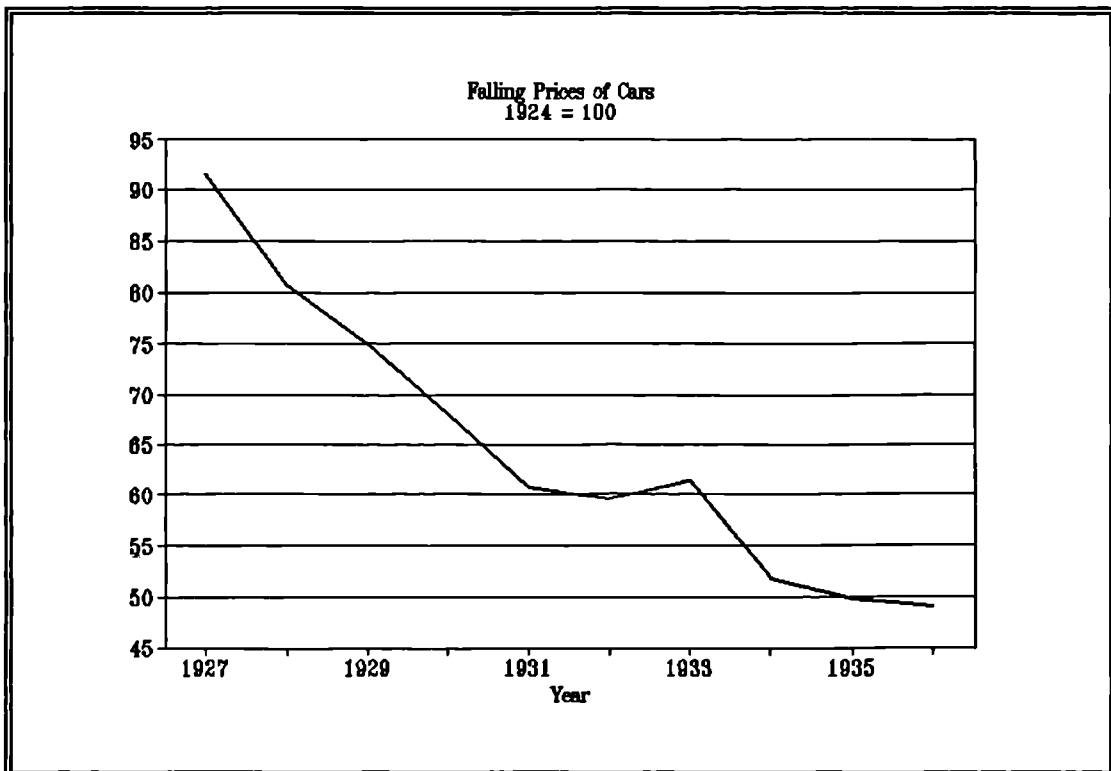
diffusion rates between various regions.<sup>[2]</sup> However, although the econometric nature of that work does allow for what is seen as the utilitarian value of motor cars to be taken into account, a sense of the symbolic function of car ownership is absent. The approach taken here is influenced by both the economic and cultural sides of the consumption debates. The study will begin by outlining existing historical interpretations of the development of mass motoring in interwar Britain which have very much focused on the economic conditions which framed the behaviour of car manufacturers. It will be seen that these arguments are compelling but that they do not tell the full story. In order to do that an understanding of how consumers framed their decisions has to be reached; and to do this an assessment of middle-class notions of taste and social status must enter the equation, alongside the economic variables. As part of this process it will prove fruitful to analyse the term consumption, in every sense, by examining the uses to which cars were put in interwar Britain. This analysis begins in chapter two, but this first chapter will offer an assessment of what business and economic historians have been able to tell us about car ownership in interwar Britain.

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<sup>[2]</sup> S. Bowden, 'Demand And Supply Constraints The Inter-War UK Car Industry: Did The Manufacturers Get It Right?', *Business History*, 33, (1991), pp. 241-267. S. Bowden and P. Turner, 'Some Cross-Section Evidence On The Determinants Of The Diffusion Of Car Ownership In The Inter-War UK Economy', *Business History*, 35, (1993), pp. 55-69. S. Bowden and P. Turner, 'Demand for Consumer Durables in the Interwar Period', *Journal of Economic History*, 53, (1993), pp. 244-257. S. Bowden, 'New Consumerism', in P. Johnson (ed), *20th Century Britain: An Economic, Social and Cultural History* (Singapore, 1994).



**Figure 1** *Source: Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, The Motor Industry of Great Britain (Annual)*



**Figure 2** *Source: Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, The Motor Industry of Great Britain (Annual)*

## Demand, Supply and the Diffusion of Car Ownership

The inter-war years saw the first signs of mass motoring in Britain. By 1938 over 2 million private cars were registered, with approximately 20 per cent of families having access to the pleasures and conveniences offered by the motor car (See Figure One). Historians have offered a variety of explanations for this growth, not least of which was the very appreciable decline in prices (See Figure Two). These reductions were due largely to the production of smaller cars together with the increased rationalisation and efficiency of production. The rising levels of real income amongst the middle classes were also instrumental in extending the market, particularly following the recovery from slump in the early 1930's.<sup>[3]</sup> Hire purchase is also widely believed to have had a significant impact on the market, with an estimated 60 per cent of all sales involving some form of deferred payment in 1927.<sup>[4]</sup>

The presence of the Ford motor company in Britain, with factories at Trafford Park from 1911 and Dagenham from 1931, also served to concentrate motor manufacturers' minds on the extension of the market that had been achieved in the United States. By 1913 Ford UK had managed to corner an estimated 60 per cent of the market for low-priced models (under £200), prompting several British

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<sup>[3]</sup> R. Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry* (1994), pp. 11-20. Harold Perkin estimates that in the period 1913-1938 average annual salaries rose by 71 per cent whilst prices rose by 56 per cent. H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society* (1989), pp. 270-71.

<sup>[4]</sup> R. Church 'The Marketing of Automobiles in Britain and the United States before 1939' in A. Okochi and K Shimokawa (eds), *The International Conference on Business History 7: The Development of Mass Marketing* (Tokyo, 1981), pp. 59-87.

manufacturers to introduce cheaper models. Their Trafford Park plant began life in 1911 as an assembly depot for chassis, engines and components shipped over from America. In that first year Ford obtained sales of 1,485 cars and by 1913 manufactured 29 per cent of total motor car production in Britain. In doing so, they sold more cars than the next five largest companies combined: Wolseley, Austin, Singer, Rover, and Morris.<sup>[5]</sup> However, as Sue Bowden has noted, it is a mistake to compare the British market solely with the United States. The American market, with ownership levels reaching truly mass proportions, was the 'deviant' one in the period, whilst the British did well in terms of European performance.

**Table One**  
**Motor Car Ownership (000's)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Italy</b>
<b>1924</b>	15,460	580	374	132	60
<b>1925</b>	17,494	693	450	175	88
<b>1926</b>	19,237	800	585	207	108
<b>1927</b>	20,219	899	656	268	225
<b>1928</b>	21,379	998	740	351	149
<b>1929</b>	23,122	1,098	885	433	189
<b>1930</b>	23,059	1,178	1,080	501	211
<b>1931</b>	22,366	1,193	1,290	523	221
<b>1932</b>	20,886	1,236	1,341	497	237
<b>1933</b>	20,616	1,313	1,397	522	258
<b>1934</b>	21,524	1,421	1,410	608	276
<b>1935</b>	22,456	1,592	1,565	800	291
<b>1936</b>	24,098	1,726	1,650	1,062	305
<b>1937</b>	25,343	1,890	1,661	1,108	346

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<sup>[5]</sup> R. Church and M. Miller, 'The Big Three: Competition, Management, and Marketing in the British Motor History, 1922-1939' in B. Supple (ed), *Essays in British Business History* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 163-186.

1938	25,134	2,045	1,745	1,416	362
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Source: S. Bowden, 'The Interwar Car Industry'. Ownership is defined in terms of cars registered.

As Table One indicates Britain had more car owners than France, Germany and Italy throughout the interwar decades, with the exception of 1931-4 when France had a slight lead in this respect. France also had a small lead in terms of ownership per head of population. In 1934, for instance, car ownership in the USA stood at 1 to every 5.7 residents, compared with 1 for every 29 Britons, 26 French, 84 Germans and 147 Italians. British prices were slightly lower than elsewhere in Europe: the average car in Germany and France retailed at £220, with the British figure being £210 in 1936. The equivalent U.S. figure was £159.30.<sup>[6]</sup>

Notwithstanding the British industry's success, when measured against some of its European contemporaries, a debate has arisen over the failure of British motor manufacturers to introduce a Fordist system of production which could have generated economies of scale in production, thereby enabling significant extension of the market. The debate can be summarised in terms of demand and supply factors.

It is most often the historians who have focused on Anglo-American comparisons who have criticised the British motor manufacturers' failure to secure a mass market based on Fordist techniques. A prominent figure in this literature has been Wayne Lewchuk, who has identified what he feels were two fundamental structural problems with the British motor manufacturing industry. His first argument is that as a consequence of shareholders' preference for dividends, rather than investment, motor manufacturers pursued a short-term strategy which prevented the

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<sup>[6]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', p. 256.



investment necessary to develop a mass market.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, between 1929-1933 Morris Motors retained 50 per cent of net earnings within their business, a figure that dropped to 25 per cent in the period 1934-1938. Austin, as Table Two demonstrates, retained only 33 per cent and 31 per cent in the corresponding years. (See Table Two)<sup>[8]</sup>

**Table Two**  
**Proportion of Net Earnings Retained**  
**by 'Big Six' Manufacturers**

Manufacturer	1929-1933	1934-1938
Morris	50%	25%
Austin	33%	31%
Standard	80%	40%
Rootes	No Figures	No Figures
Ford	20%	23%
Vauxhall	72%	42%

Source: R. Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry*.

Secondly, Lewchuck claims that British employers failed to take full control of the production process in the crucial years after the First World War. Rather than a Fordist system emerging, something which he labels the 'British system of mass production' evolved, in which workers were given the opportunity to set production targets through the operation of piece-work. According to Lewchuck, this system emerged as a result of union power in the immediate aftermath of the war and

<sup>[7]</sup> W. A. Lewchuck, 'The origins of Fordism and alternative strategies: Britain and the United States, 1880-1930' in Tolliday, S and Zeitlin, J. *Between Fordism and Flexibility, the International Motor Industry and its Workers* (Oxford, 1985). Lewchuck, 'The Motor Vehicle Industry', in B. Elbaum and W. Lazonick, (eds), *The Decline of the British Economy* (Oxford, 1986). Lewchuck, *American Technology and The British Vehicle Industry* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>[8]</sup> See R. Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry* (1994), pp. 26-31 for a critique of Lewchuk's assessment of financial policy.

because of a self-imposed limit to management authority, by employers who found the 'herd systems' of Fordist factories unattractive. So, British levels of productivity remained lower than those in the American industry, but profits (per car) remained higher because retail prices did too.<sup>[9]</sup>

In replying to Lewchuk, Steve Tolliday seems to have seriously damaged the former's claims about trade union power in the interwar motor industry. In particular, Tolliday has argued that trade unionism was weak in the industry, with significant amounts of female and boy labour tending to exacerbate this situation. Standard Motors, for example, was known as 'Boy's Town', as a result of its policy of laying off the majority of young workers when they reached maturity.<sup>[10]</sup> Most importantly, however, Tolliday, followed by Bowden and Bowden and Turner,<sup>[11]</sup> argues that the largest British companies developed a system of production which was highly justified as a response to the market conditions they faced. This school of thought maintains that a Fordist strategy was not possible for interwar motor manufacturers because the UK market was too small, being limited to upper and middle-class consumers. The skewed distribution of income in Britain ensured that running costs were a major stumbling block in the path of any mass market strategies.<sup>[12]</sup> So, for example, Morris and Austin, the two largest manufacturers,

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<sup>[9]</sup> Lewchuk, 'The Motor Vehicle Industry'. Lewchuk, *American Technology and The British Vehicle Industry*.

<sup>[10]</sup> S. Tolliday, 'The Failure of Mass Production Unionism in the Motor Industry, 1914-1939', in C. Wrigley (ed), *A History of British Industrial Relations: Volume II* (Brighton, 1987), p. 308.

<sup>[11]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry'. Bowden and Turner, 'The Diffusion Of Car Ownership'. Bowden and Turner, 'Demand for Consumer Durables'.

<sup>[12]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', p. 242.

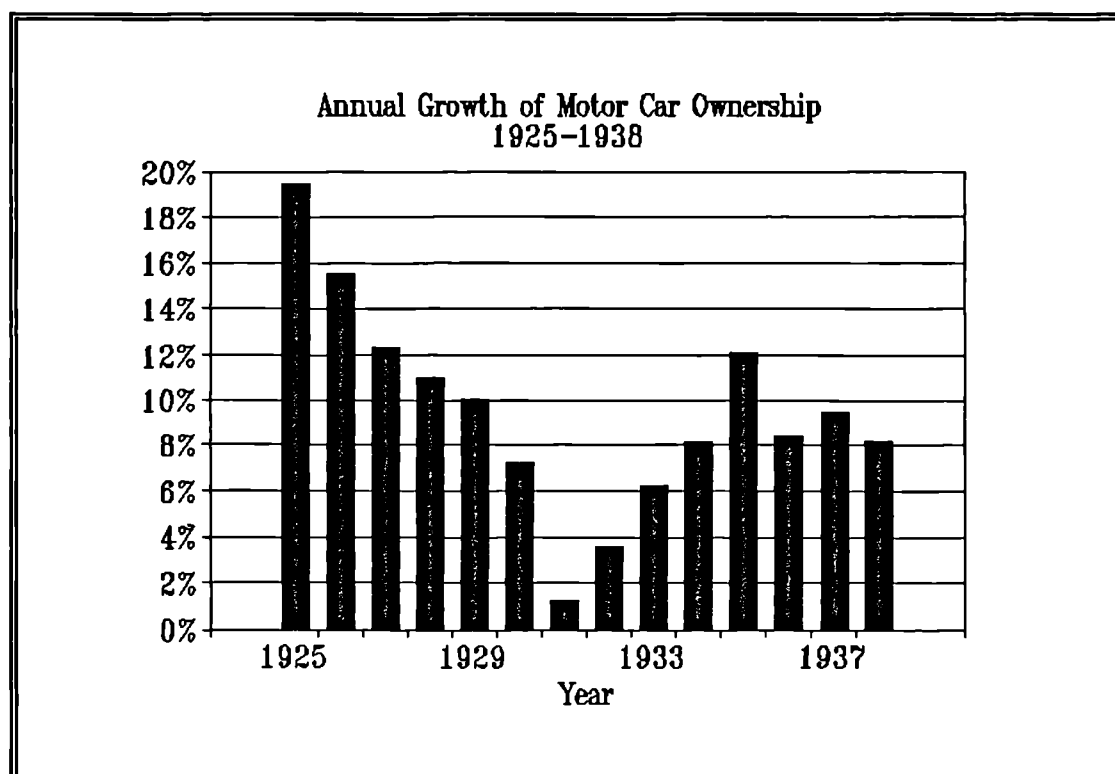
gave a high priority to the quality and improvement of models. They also looked for refinements in the production process, rather than seeking to establish a system with a fixed level of production. In other words, they avoided capital intensive production in order to maintain flexibility and as a result remained the most profitable of the UK manufacturers.<sup>[13]</sup> Those European manufacturers who did attempt to follow the Fordist path - Ford in Britain, Citroen and Berliet in France and Fiat in Italy - nearly ruined themselves by erecting capital intensive plants, designed for single mass products, which subsequently proved unable to meet market demand for model differentiation.<sup>[14]</sup>

If supply-side changes do not satisfactorily explain the successes and failures of the British motor industry in this period it is crucial to examine demand-side factors. Here too a variety of arguments have emerged to explain various issues in the development of the interwar motor industry. Of central importance was the fact that the level of middle-class real incomes rose in this period, particularly following the recovery from slump in the early 1930's. A comparison of Figure Three with Figure Two indicates the significance of this development. Together they reveal that growth in ownership increased appreciably in the years following the economic slump, despite the fact that these years witnessed an end to large scale price competition amongst the manufacturers. Indeed, there were price rises in 1933.

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[13] S. Tolliday, 'Management and Labour in Britain, 1896-1939', in S. Tolliday and J. Zeitlin (eds), *The Automobile Industry and Its Workers: Between Fordism and Flexibility* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 37.

[14] Tolliday, 'The Failure of Mass Production Unionism', p. 301.



**Figure 3** *Source: Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, The Motor Industry of Great Britain (Annual)*

However, this was not the only factor involved: government policies were also important, producing mixed results for the motor industry. The McKenna duties, which were introduced in September 1915 as a tariff on luxury items such as motor cars and cycles, proved to be an effective protectionist measure throughout the inter-war period, helping British manufacturers retain the lion's share of the home market. But whilst protecting industry, government policy denied the consumer the full benefit of unshackled competition which might have lowered prices. An indication of the possible level of demand for imported, largely American, cars was revealed in 1925 when the impact of the Labour Government's abolition of the duties was felt. That

move saw net import sales soar to 28 per cent, from a figure of 15 per cent in 1924.<sup>[15]</sup>

But even if large numbers of American imports had entered the country without the need to pay the McKenna duties, the large-engined American models would have been particularly penalised by the horsepower tax. Whilst British motorists faced lower bills for fuel than their continental contemporaries<sup>[16]</sup> they were at a clear disadvantage in terms of taxation. In the late 1930's total standing charges on an average eight horsepower car were £32.35 whilst total annual running costs would amount to £24.75: a grand total of £57.10, or over a third of the car's original cost price.<sup>[17]</sup> Motorists had to find the yearly cost of garaging facilities if they did not have their own,<sup>[18]</sup> a driving licence, fuel tax, insurance (compulsory from 1930) as well as the horsepower tax. Introduced in 1909, it was based on a formula worked out by the RAC and came to have a major influence on the market.<sup>[19]</sup> By 1920 motorists were paying £1 for every unit of horsepower their car possessed, adding further to motoring costs and increasing the popularity of smaller or medium sized cars. Cars such as the Austin Seven, the Ford Eight and the

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<sup>[15]</sup> Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry*, p. 12. The duties were reimposed by the succeeding Conservative Government.

<sup>[16]</sup> Retail price per gallon of petrol (including tax) in 1937: GB 19.5p; Germany 34.7p; Italy 26.8p; France 25.6p. Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', p. 259.

<sup>[17]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>[18]</sup> Motorists were required by law to park cars off the road at night, or alternatively leave them lighted.

<sup>[19]</sup> This tax was based on bore rather than stroke and therefore led to the production of long thin engines which attempted to squeeze the best out of the rating from the driver's viewpoint i.e. giving the most engine power for the least tax.

Morris Eight, whose 250,000 sales between 1934 and 1938 made it the biggest seller of the period, were market leaders.<sup>[20]</sup>

Although government policy in this case was influential in the move towards smaller, cheaper cars, the effects of the horsepower tax were to hinder car sales: a point which is illustrated by the significant rise in sales in 1935, when horse power tax was reduced by twenty five per cent (see Figure Three). Further government incentives for the industry were not forthcoming and opportunities were certainly missed to extend the market via tax incentives. That changes in government policy could encourage or fetter the market's expansion is demonstrated by the impressive rise in German car ownership which took place in the 1930s (see Table One). The growth was largely due to tax concessions introduced in 1933. Motor tax was abolished, thereby reducing motor costs by up to 15 per cent and companies were encouraged to purchase cars by tax concessions introduced on new vehicle purchases. As a result companies could save as much as 70 per cent of a vehicle's original cost price. Similar concessions were introduced for the used car sector.<sup>[21]</sup> However, Roy Church has recently returned to this area of the debate to point out that the Nazi government's *Motorisierung* policy, including extensive road building as well the fiscal concessions outlined above, was introduced to deal with the deep unemployment experienced in Germany. In contrast Britain's economic difficulties were of a lesser magnitude and car ownership significantly greater.<sup>[22]</sup>

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<sup>[20]</sup> G. Bishop, *The Age of the Automobile* (1977), p. 62.

<sup>[21]</sup> R.J. Overy, 'Cars, Roads and Economic Recovery in Germany, 1932-1938', *Economic History Review*, 28 (1975), p. 474.

<sup>[22]</sup> Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry*, p. 17.

A further factor hindering greater rises in UK car ownership was the inability of any one or two companies to achieve a lasting dominance in the industry, in the manner in which Ford had been able to do for a number of years in the USA. This dominance had been a contributory factor in Ford's ability to accelerate the introduction of mass production, thereby providing greater scope for price cutting. At the beginning of the interwar period the industry in the UK was based on a large number of small firms, many of which led a very precarious financial existence. By the end of the period Morris, Austin and Ford were the three largest concerns but all had at one time or another lost the initiative to rivals. Vauxhall, Standard and the Rootes Group were by the end of the 1930's achieving a significant share of the market for private cars. Whereas in 1938 Morris, Ford and Austin sold 61.4 per cent of private cars in the UK, in America Ford, General Motors and Chrysler had 85 per cent of the market, in France Citroen, Peugeot and Renault had 74 per cent and in Germany Opel and Blitz and DKW and Adler had 70 per cent of private car sales.<sup>[23]</sup>

The main determinant of this trend was the nature of the middle-class market that developed in the 1930s. Recent econometric analysis of that market has largely exonerated the manufacturers from accusations that they missed opportunities to introduce a Fordist mass production system. Employing consumer demand theory Sue Bowden and Paul Turner have reiterated the assessment offered by Tolliday. They argue that limited demand and the unpredictable nature of the market led manufacturers to conclude that production and marketing strategies should be centred around extending the existing middle-class market. This course was preferred to a

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<sup>[23]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', p. 261.

high risk strategy of heavy technological and financial investment in an attempt to prompt rapid market extension. In choosing a policy of risk aversion they ensured that motoring remained a 'middle-class affair' and replicated the behaviour of manufacturers in most other British industries of the period.<sup>[24]</sup> The high running cost of a car led manufacturers to prophesy that ownership would remain a strictly middle-class aspiration for some time. By 1938 the SMMT were predicting that car ownership was not possible for anyone earning less than £250 per annum.<sup>[25]</sup> This was commonly viewed as marking an economic dividing line between the middle classes and the rest of society. Only 25 per cent of all households fell into the SMMT's category. With the number of car-owning families standing at around 20 per cent in the late 1930s the industry settled for the steady profits to be made from seeking to extend the middle-class market whilst simultaneously stimulating replacement demand. For example, in 1937 Morris Motors' pre-tax profits amounted to almost £2 million and Austin Motors made a net profit of £1.25 million.<sup>[26]</sup>

Thus, according to Bowden and Turner the private car was in the second of the three stages of the diffusion process. The first stage involves the identification of a good as a luxury, with concomitant prices. The second stage is ushered in by technological changes in the production process which make cheaper retail prices possible. The third stage of mass ownership is reached when further economies of scale and technological improvements make further price reductions possible.

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[24] Bowden, 'New Consumerism'. Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry'. Bowden and Turner, 'The Diffusion Of Car Ownership'. Bowden and Turner, 'Demand for Consumer Durables'.

[25] Political and Economic Planning, *Motor Vehicles* (1950), p. 58.

[26] Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', p. 258.



Consumer demand theory also posits a shift in consumers' perception of a product from an initial status as a luxury good to one of everyday essential. Bowden and Turner extend this argument, suggesting that 'within each stage of the entire diffusion process there may be a learning process in which perceptions of a good are transformed from a luxury to a necessity'.<sup>[27]</sup> They hypothesise that as car ownership diffused amongst the middle classes various elements amongst this income group began to view the car in this manner.<sup>[28]</sup> By comparing household taxation returns for each county, SMMT sales figures for the same areas, the rural/urban population proportions for each county and the numbers of professionals who worked there, they construct a model which has led them to make several assertions about the nature of the motoring community.<sup>[29]</sup>

The first of these is that the car was becoming a necessity for the middle classes by the late 1930s. In particular, they suggest, it was becoming an important occupational tool for professionals.<sup>[30]</sup> This may particularly have been the case in rural areas where the professional's clients were more dispersed and public transport

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<sup>[27]</sup> Bowden and Turner, 'The Diffusion of Car Ownership', p. 59.

<sup>[28]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[29]</sup> They drew their income tax data from G. Harrison and F.C. Mitchell, *The Home Market: A Handbook of Statistics* (1936 and 1938). For the percentage of the population living in rural areas and the numbers of professionals they used the Registrar General's *Statistical Review* (1924-1938).

<sup>[30]</sup> Their professional variable included those whose head of household were included in the following occupational groups: accountancy and actuarial practice; architecture; consultant engineering and surveying; consultant practice in chemistry and other science; dentistry; education; industrial and trade associations; law; art; literature and music; medicine; political associations; religion; social welfare associations; and veterinary surgery. Bowden and Turner, 'Diffusion of Car Ownership', p. 59.

inadequate.<sup>[31]</sup> Secondly, their computations suggest a surprisingly low level of car ownership amongst the lower middle classes. Third, they identify a stronger professional coefficient for large and medium sized cars by 1937 than was the case for 1934.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Conclusion

These findings are extremely thought-provoking. They provide an economic perspective on the way in which demand conditioned supply in the development of interwar car-ownership. They also furnish the social historian with valuable data with which to contrast other forms of evidence. Of particular value in this study is that the typicality of oral and other informants can be cross-referenced with Bowden and Turner's contentions about the social composition of the motoring community. In the process of contrasting these two forms of evidence it will become clear that Bowden and Turner's model can only provide a partial explanation. Whilst they do recognise factors such as individual taste or the influence of marketing and advertising - *ceteris paribus* - economic historians are forced to treat cultural variables, which cannot be fitted into their model, as unexplained residuals. In the next two chapters it will be argued that matters of taste and social status were as important in moulding the market for cars as the economic factors already discussed. In the process, the

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<sup>[31]</sup>     ibid., p. 60.

<sup>[32]</sup>     ibid., p. 67.

distinction made by Bowden and Turner between the car as luxury and the car as necessity will be scrutinised. It will be suggested that this dichotomy is hazy, to say the least and that there are times when ownership of a good can be a necessity amongst members of a social group.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Who Owned Cars and How?**

## Introduction

It has been seen that several essentially economic and political factors inhibited the development of the market for private cars. However, the attitudes of the manufacturers, dealers and car-owning public also need to be examined from a perspective informed by an understanding of the symbolic dimension that the car possessed as an expensive and comparatively novel consumer durable. Bowden and Turner, and others before them, have analysed the developments of the market with a presumption, inherent in economic analyses, of the rational economic actor. However, behaviour has other influences than the purely utilitarian and there was more to the development of the interwar market for cars than can be identified by econometric studies or conventional business history.<sup>[1]</sup> Deeply rooted values which were themselves a product of, and producer of, economic behaviour influenced the development of car ownership. As Raphael Samuel, Alan A. Jackson, Alison Light and others have shown, the interwar middle classes were racked with status anxieties.<sup>[2]</sup> Sandwiched between the upper classes, whom they did their best to emulate and the working classes, whom they patronised and feared, the middle classes

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<sup>[1]</sup> For examples of the latter approach see, R. Church and M. Miller, 'The Big Three: Competition, Management, and Marketing in the British Motor History, 1922-1939' in B. Supple (ed), *Essays in British Business History* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 163-186. Church, Herbert Austin, (1979). Church, 'The Marketing of Automobiles in Britain and the United States before 1939' in A. Okochi and K Shimokawa (eds), *The International Conference on Business History 7: The Development of Mass Marketing* (Tokyo, 1981). R.J. Overy, *William Morris*, (1976). Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

<sup>[2]</sup> R. Samuel, 'Middle Class between the Wars' in *New Socialist*, January/February, March/April, May/June 1983. Alan A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991). A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991).

engaged in a series of lifestyle choices designed to express, consolidate and hopefully enhance their status. The choice of school for one's children, or home for the family, was of great importance as it signified the family's wealth, status and discernment. Although it was important to make consumption choices that were evocative of one's social accomplishment it was equally important to remain tasteful rather than vulgar and 'cranky'. The *Autocar* columnist Owen John recognised this, in 1920, quoting Shakespeare to reinforce his advice to aspiring motorists: 'Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,/ But not expressed in fancy; rich not gaudy;/ For the apparel oft proclaims the man'.<sup>[3]</sup>

Economic historians working on the development of the market for cars in the interwar period also concentrate exclusively on the new car market but the aim of this study is to chart the influence of the motor car and motoring, therefore, developments in the second hand market are of interest too. Indeed, analysis of the evolution of this market sheds light on certain issues affecting the rate of growth in the market for new cars as well. This chapter will therefore analyse the ways in which considerations of taste and social status defined the choices available to car buyers, manufacturers and dealers. Previous work has acknowledged the effect of middle-class taste on car design and the proliferation of models. Here, significant new evidence will be unveiled indicating that similar notions also affected the ways in which the car was sold. In particular it will be shown that despite the apparent success of hire purchase, it was a form of payment which was looked upon with a great deal of ambivalence. As a result manufacturers and dealers soft-pedalled their use of this method of payment. It was rarely featured in advertising, for example,

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<sup>[3]</sup> *Autocar*, 6 Nov 1920. The quote is from *Hamlet*.

and strict limitations were placed on its use by finance companies. The extent to which this previously unacknowledged factor may have limited market growth will be assessed. In the course of this discussion it will become clear that though manufacturers and dealers were not tempted to initiate more radical sales and marketing policies - indeed there were many within the industry who advocated price fixing - there were consumers who were prepared to restructure their own finances to attain car ownership. Significant numbers of lower middle class or well-paid working-class people became car owners in this period, even sharing car ownership where necessary.

### **‘By Their Cars Ye Shall Know Them’ Taste, Status and The Emergence of Middle-Class Motoring**

The role of taste and status in the developing market for cars has not been entirely ignored by economic and business historians. They have acknowledged their impact upon the design and production strategies of manufacturers in the 1930s.<sup>[4]</sup> As has been noted above, the price competition of the 1920s was largely put to one side as the largest producers embarked instead on a policy of model/price competition and product differentiation. They followed this route for two reasons. First, throughout the interwar years market saturation was felt to be imminent given the skewed distribution of income in the British economy. Any policy of Fordist mass production

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<sup>[4]</sup> Bowden, ‘The Inter-War Car Industry’. Church and Miller, ‘The Big Three’, Church, *Herbert Austin*. Church, ‘The Marketing of Automobiles in Britain and the United States’ G. Maxcy and A. Silbertson, *The Motor Industry* (1959).

was therefore dismissed as impractical. Second, manufacturers were responding to growing signs amongst their existing market of an increased desire to express status and individuality through the choice of motor car. This trend was demonstrated both by the poor sales of cheap economy cars, such as the 1931 Morris Minor S.V., and the increased employment, by individual buyers, of coach builders who created special bodies for low-priced cars such as the Austin Seven and Wolseley Hornet.

The Morris Minor S.V. was introduced in 1931 at a cost price of £100 and appeared to represent one of the last attempts by a British manufacturer to place cost-price entirely ahead of aesthetic considerations. It was a spartan car modelled on the successful Ford Eight, pared down to the absolute minimum with only a three-speed gearbox and a windscreen wiper with only one blade. It did not sell well at all, as Miles Thomas, sales manager at Morris Motors at the time, recalled in his autobiography:

To our great delight, orders...pour in...but not, thank heavens, for the £100 car on which the profit margin was so slender. We had the foresight to catalogue an alternative two-seater. It had a four-speed gearbox, a windscreen wiper with two blades, and choice of colour, and I think there was a clock on the dashboard.

It was an interesting exercise in consumer preference that although attention was undoubtedly attracted to the Morris Minor by the fact that one *could* be purchased for as little as £100, the actual buyers wanted something that showed that they had *not* bought the cheapest product. And so everybody was happy. No one wants to keep down with the Joneses!<sup>[5]</sup>

That they had 'the foresight' to catalogue an alternative, more expensive, model indicates that the marketing of this car was more a sales stunt than a genuine attempt to begin a long production run of a new economy car. This interpretation is

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<sup>[5]</sup> M.W. Thomas, *Out on a Wing* (1964), p. 168.



supported by an article which appeared in *Advertiser's Weekly* appraising the advertising campaign, which bore the headline 'Why Price is Not the Main Sales Argument for the £100 car'. It described how 'After a week or two, however, "the £100 car" as a heading was dropped for, I think, fairly obvious reasons'.<sup>[6]</sup> The fairly obvious reasoning was that in the world of middle-class motoring it was a mistake to be seen in the cheapest car. There may well have been many middle-class families who could have found the finances to buy an economy Morris Minor but were discouraged from doing so by the loss of social kudos that such a purchase would have entailed. Indeed, despite Miles Thomas's upbeat assessment of the sales of the slightly more sophisticated Morris Minor, that too proved to be a disappointing seller for the Morris organisation, who experienced a significant reduction in their market share in the 1930's.

A decade earlier, with cars in short supply following the war, a cheap Ford was often the only car available to buyers. With no other purchase in prospect many bit the bullet and bought one and then engaged in efforts to camouflage the true identity of their car. The pages of the *Autocar* regularly featured photographs of Fords with new bodies placed on their chassis. A humorous poem from one issue is illustrative of the image that the Ford had and also alludes to the practice of automotive disguise.

He was the rudest little boy  
 Who stood outside the inn.  
 Made such rude remarks to motorists,  
 With such a knowing grin.  
 He watched me wrap the engine up of my Metallic Liz.  
 Then jeered, "You needn't hide it, boss,

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<sup>[6]</sup> *Advertiser's Weekly*, 20 March 1931.

I've seen the make it is!"<sup>[7]</sup>

Figure One, from which this section borrows its title, also reveals the associations drawn from ownership of the Model T, the unflattering depiction of its occupants 'Enery and Liz' clearly declaring its lowly position in the motoring hierarchy.

By the late 1920s companies such as Thrupp and Maberley and designers like William Lyons were busily catering to desires for individuality in the motoring community, providing special bodies to glamorise cheap models such as the Austin Seven and Wolseley Hornet. By 1932 Wolseley were producing a Hornet chassis with no body to allow customers to have their own special bodies built to their own taste without the need to pay for two sets of bonnets, wings and running boards.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1933 the *Autocar* reported on this phenomenon, expressing surprise at the number of expensive bodies being built at Thrupp and Maberley despite the recession.

Of course, you have to pay for it in the same way a woman has to pay for a dress from one of the great *couturieres*. But, like her, you get something different, and you won't take someone else's car from a park by mistake. All of which is very nice to us English, a distinction loving people if ever there was one.<sup>[9]</sup>

This tendency indicated that middle-class motorists were establishing the same patterns of differentiation and status seen in housing, dress, and many other areas of consumption. Cars came second to the family home in cost price, but their mobility meant that they acquired, what Roy Church has called, 'a special dysfunctional utility,

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<sup>[7]</sup> *Autocar*, 28 January 1921.

<sup>[8]</sup> *ibid.*, 22 April 1932.

<sup>[9]</sup> *ibid.*, 16 December 1933.

BY THEIR CARS YE SHALL  
KNOW THEM.



*Si- Coupay and Lady de Ville.*



*Mr. and Mrs. "Popular Twenty."*



*Mr. Elwyn Poyntyn and his wife.*



*Sam and Sadie Severn*



*Enery and Liz*

as objects of status'.<sup>[10]</sup> The horsepower rating of a motorist's car indicated something about the owner's status, as well as the tax rating it fell into. Manufacturers built a model in each category so as not to miss out on a particular market niche. A statement from the Vauxhall company, issued in the 1930s and published in Political and Economic Planning's (PEP) *Motor Vehicles*, indicates that the manufacturers were aware of what were described as 'psychological rather than economic' factors.

This tax business has become an obsession in the mind of the motorist. An 'eight', he realises, costs less in tax and insurance than a 'ten' or a 'twelve' and so on: and other factors have largely had to be ignored. There is a 'class-consciousness' in horsepowers, and the manufacturer has to build a model for every class, and to suit every purse.<sup>[11]</sup>

So, as PEP observed, manufacturers produced a cheap, small model of seven or eight horsepower, hoping it would capture a large market whilst also offering a number of other models, designed to appeal to the better-off. Such a policy avoided the risk inherent in single model production whilst enabling manufacturers 'to cultivate technical, aesthetic or snobbish appeal'.

Unlike most other engineering products, cars have been at once capital goods and fashion goods. Many motorists wanted not the best value in cheapness and efficiency but in these qualities combined with imposing appearance; others were attracted by distinctiveness and the opportunity to display real or fancied discrimination.<sup>[12]</sup>

It could, therefore, be argued that Bowden and Turner's evidence of significant correlation between areas of high professional occupational residence and

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<sup>[10]</sup> Church, 'The Marketing of Automobiles',

<sup>[11]</sup> Political and Economic Planning, *Motor Vehicles* (1950), p. 65.

<sup>[12]</sup> Political and Economic Planning, *Motor Vehicles* (1950), p. 130.

sales of large and medium cars is not simply indicative of the professional classes beginning to regard the car as a necessity but also their concern to register good taste, discernment and their financial and business standing. As such the use of the term necessity must take on symbolic as well as utilitarian connotations. Economists have at times called some consumer durables 'Veblen goods' which are defined as commodities from which satisfaction is derived from their effect on other people rather than, or as well as, the intrinsic qualities of the good itself. In this case a better, more expensive, car was a sign of pecuniary achievement. Furthermore, a bandwagon effect can build up surrounding the consumption of such goods, in other words a process of pecuniary emulation develops. To paraphrase Veblen the pervading principle and abiding test of a person's taste and refinement is based on the possession and spending of money.<sup>[13]</sup> The question here is what motivated car-buyers? The acquisition of a £100 car should have met any 'basic need' amongst consumers. Indeed, it could be argued that a motorcycle might have proved more utilitarian for any professional seeking to travel speedily around clients and associates in a busy city centre. Veblen argued that those with resources greater than what is required to meet the cost of a good will continue to be acquisitive, in terms of seeking more expensive forms of the commodity, as to do so confers greater status on them. As has been demonstrated above, this was certainly an aspect of consumption that it is possible to identify amongst interwar car-buyers. This was a general feature of middle-class life at the time: the interwar middle-classes were often

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<sup>[13]</sup> T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1899), p. 51.

engaged in the anxious production of endless discriminations.<sup>[14]</sup> They constantly assessed each other's standing and could be painfully aware of the slightest differences between them. The consumption of the car provides a prime example of this. Oral interviewee John Flitcroft reported how in his childhood in the early 1920s car ownership was significant in itself: 'I was the only kid I knew, apart from other garage owners' kids whose people had a car. To have a car gave you enormous cache'. However, as he grew older he began to learn of the distinctions that could be drawn:

we all saw them roaring around - the sort of sporty boys, the sort of university undergraduates and that, with their Morgans and things like that - and we envied them greatly. There's nothing quite like a sort of Sports, Supersports Morgan, you know the little three-wheeler, you know when a couple of exhaust pipes pass your ears and a long scarf floating in the wind - and there they were and that was money and we hadn't got any money.

As Graham Robson reports, certain cars could be identified with different social groups: 'It would never have done, for instance, for a respectable bank manager to be seen in a sports car and certainly he would never have considered any type of imported car'.<sup>[15]</sup> 'Appropriate' cars for the gentry were Armstrong-Siddleys, Bentleys, Lanchesters and Rolls-Royces but they studiously avoided Humbers - which were seen as the cars of the staid middle-aged middle-classes. As a conventional car Humbers proved a safer choice than the SS.1 and its immediate successors which had an unfortunate reputation that was very widespread. During the course of research for this thesis a string of negative appellations applied to them

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[14] R. Samuel, 'Middle Class between the Wars'. Alan A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950*. A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*.

[15] G. Robson, *Motoring in the Thirties*, (Cambridge, 1979), p. 35.

have been unearthed both in motoring literature and in oral interviews. The SS.1 was often referred to as 'a cad's car', or 'a promenade Percy's car': it also had a reputation as a flashy car favoured by 'spivs' and 'shady traders'. It is in this context that it gathered the unfortunate sobriquet of the 'Jew's Bentley'. The SS car was probably the first to have its chassis designed by body-builders, giving it an attractive and expensive appearance. The *Autocar* review on its unveiling said that it was a £310 model that looked like a £1000 car.<sup>[16]</sup> This discrepancy between looks and cost may explain some of the animosity towards the car. Bourdieu argues that taste functions as a marker of class: 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier'.<sup>[17]</sup> Thus, the hierarchical consumption of goods provides an insight into social relations: in the case of the S.S. car its comparatively low cost allowed new social groups to enter the sports-car niche. Hence its buyers came to be viewed as intruders in a sphere of motoring they had previously been unable to join, with the result that they were classified - by the 'Bentley Boys' and others amongst motoring's cognoscenti - as a motoring nouveau riche whose sense of good taste had not caught up with their purchasing power. If the car were judged on looks alone today's visitor to Coventry's Transport Museum might well decide that the SS was more attractive than the Bentley.

Thus, annual model changes, increased accent on styling and accessories on even the cheapest cars together with production of models in all price and horsepower categories kept unit costs high, inevitably hindering the industry's ability to reduce

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<sup>[16]</sup> *Autocar*, 9th October 1931.

<sup>[17]</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1986), pp. 1-2.

retail prices.<sup>[18]</sup> By 1938, the six largest producing groups were turning out forty different types of engines and in the case of twenty six of these fewer than a thousand units were being manufactured annually.<sup>[19]</sup> By 1939 the Nuffield Organisation, the largest manufacturing group, was producing eighteen basic car types.<sup>[20]</sup> Although their size made it possible to go further, in terms of large scale production techniques, than others, the number of designs of each component resulted in the employment of many general purpose tools, thereby increasing production costs. So, in catering to middle-class concerns about social status, manufacturers helped to create a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby their actions reinforced the belief that the market for cars would remain stubbornly within the higher income brackets. This much is well documented, but did the middle classes and their caste-like desire for stratification affect other aspects of the diffusion of car ownership?

### **‘An old-fashioned but powerful prejudice’: Hire Purchase Re-assessed**

It will be argued that similar patterns of middle-class taste and status shaped the marketing, selling and uses to which cars were put in the interwar years. Our analysis begins with an examination of attitudes towards hire purchase, which has been widely credited with extending ownership in this period. British buyers were

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<sup>[18]</sup> Bowden, ‘Demand and Supply’, p. 263.

<sup>[19]</sup> P.S. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770*, (1974), p. 212.

<sup>[20]</sup> Nuffield was built up on the success of Morris Motors. In 1927 William Morris (later Lord Nuffield) had personally acquired Wolseley Motors Ltd. The Riley Motor Co. was purchased in 1938. The group also included the M.G. Car Co. Ltd.



offered hire purchase terms from 1912,<sup>[21]</sup> and by 1927 it was estimated that 60 per cent of all sales in Britain involved deferred payment.<sup>[22]</sup> However, the expansion of instalment selling in Britain was not as great, proportionately, as in some countries. By 1927 the German figure was 75 per cent, the Italian 75 per cent and in the affluent USA the number making use of such facilities was 64 per cent.<sup>[23]</sup> In France, where, rural buyers were notoriously suspicious of hire purchase the figure was lower, at 50 per cent (7 per cent new and 43 per cent used).<sup>[24]</sup> Why, with the exception of France, were the British figures the lowest amongst the major car-buying nations? A trawl through the pages of the trade press, the *Motor Trader* and *Garage and Motor Agent*, reveals a series of ambivalent attitudes towards hire purchase on the part of dealers and car buyers. These reflect not only business concerns, but also tension between social sensibilities and the possible symbolic implications of hire purchase.

In 1936 the chairman of the Motor Finance Corporation declared in the *Motor Trader*: 'So far as I am aware, no manufacturer and no dealer has, as yet, attempted to use hire purchase facilities as an advertising stunt to sell his vehicles to the public'.<sup>[25]</sup> Sampling of advertising placed in the *Autocar* and the *Motor* reveals that deferred payment plans were mentioned, but only on an irregular basis, with such

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<sup>[21]</sup> *Crowther Report on Consumer Credit, Volume One : Hire Purchase*, p. 185.

<sup>[22]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', p. 254.

<sup>[23]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[24]</sup> P. Fridenson, 'French Automobile Marketing 1890-1979' in A. Okochi and K. Shimokawa (eds), *The Development of Mass Marketing*, pp. 127-154.

<sup>[25]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 26 February 1936.

schemes being mentioned in only 3.59 per cent of advertisements surveyed for the period 1919 to 1938.<sup>[26]</sup> On occasions when they were mentioned they were often placed, discreetly, in the small-print of the advertisement's text. This would suggest that manufacturers found hire purchase a somewhat delicate subject to broach with their middle-class public. That public shared the same reticent outlook. Although more and more car-buyers made use of what were dubbed 'out of income systems' it was done with great discretion, as was recalled by Graham Robson.

Although there was a good deal of hire purchase activity, even at the beginning of the 1930's, it was always a rather hole-in-the corner and furtive way of raising the money. Somehow (and such were the fiscal standards of the day) hire purchase was always considered to be a 'not quite nice' way of financing one's purchase and it was never talked about.<sup>[27]</sup>

The motoring press also exhibited something of a guarded attitude towards this aspect of the industry. The leading motoring journal, the *Autocar*, ran regular articles on the practicalities of car ownership, with coverage of such subjects as buying new or second-hand cars and motor insurance. However, in the interwar years, they produced only one small article directly referring to hire purchase. Even this brief piece, written in 1937, was tucked away inside the back cover, and described hire purchase as a 'little known side of the automobile industry.'<sup>[28]</sup> The *Autocar* itself had certainly done little to make it better known. This circumspection would seem to have been derived from attitudes towards hire purchase demonstrated by middle-class motorists. Reports from the trade press revealed that many buyers were

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<sup>[26]</sup> One issue of *The Motor* or *The Autocar* was taken for each year from 1919 until 1939. A total of 417 advertisements were analysed.

<sup>[27]</sup> Robson, *Motoring in The Thirties*, p. 35.

<sup>[28]</sup> *Autocar*, 10 September 1937.

prepared to go to great lengths to conceal their use of instalment payment. In 1924 the *Garage and Motor Agent* commented on this trend:

Motorists who want to buy cars on the instalment plan are, it is well known, shy of putting their orders in the hands of local agents. That is one of the strong planks in the platform of London agents who contend that districts outside London should not be closed to them, because much of the business which they obtain would not be placed at all, were it not for the privacy the provincial purchasers feel is theirs when far from their homes...But it is likely that as time goes on, and deferred payments for cars become more general, the 'shame' of buying so will gradually die down.<sup>[29]</sup>

It concluded, by suggesting that dealers should cultivate the 'utmost security and secrecy', in order to secure this type of business. At the same time, details of hire purchase schemes should be placed in the footnotes of trader's advertising, so as not to risk the loss of cash customers. The inference is clearly that such clients liked it to be very apparent that they were indeed cash buyers. The responses of those who provided interviews, answered questionnaires or provided correspondence analysed for this thesis also indicate that hire purchase was frowned upon by many middle-class consumers. Several mentioned that buying on the 'never-never' was just not done. William McKenzie told me 'Every car I paid cash. I was brought up by a very strict Scots father who taught me the only thing you bought on tick was a house'.<sup>[30]</sup> In total, only 16.66 per cent of respondents who offered information on methods of payment recalled the use of hire purchase.<sup>[31]</sup> Obviously, this evidence is at odds

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<sup>[29]</sup> *Garage and Motor Agent*, 26 January 1924.

<sup>[30]</sup> *Interviewee Four*: William McKenzie, born London 1901. (Interviewed 3 July 1992).

<sup>[31]</sup> Only one of the eleven oral interviewees recalled paying by hire purchase. Responses to questionnaires uncovered five individuals who remembered paying by cash as opposed to two who used hire purchase. The other respondents did not answer this question, probably because they could not recall these details. Owners who recalled using hire purchase: 5, 10 and 13.

with what is known about the widespread use of hire purchase. As has been seen, its estimated use by the late 1920s stood at around 60 per cent of all sales. Perhaps, the sample drawn upon here are simply unrepresentative. It also conceivable that some respondents are still unwilling to reveal their use of hire purchase. It might also be possible, particularly in the case of female correspondents, that they were actually uninvolved in the financial side of the purchase and remained unaware of how the deal was transacted.

It must also be borne in mind that the utility value of car ownership involved more than simply being able to travel from A to B. Ownership conferred social prestige, offering the means for a display of success and fiscal stability in the owner's chosen field. In 1920, *Motor Trader* had argued that potential owners could be hooked by the argument that 'a car is taken by a number of people as an outward and visible sign of prosperity, (and will) help his credit, and his status in the town'.<sup>[32]</sup> Any suggestion that a car had been bought on the 'never-never' would tarnish this image of sound social and financial standing. This point is also in keeping with arguments already posited about Veblen goods. If one of the reasons one purchases a car is for the effect it has on others, that impact will be diminished if it becomes apparent that the car is still officially owned by a motor dealer.

If, as *Garage and Motor Agent* suggested it would, the 'shame' of buying via hire purchase died down, it was still strong enough in 1935 to merit further concerned comment. 'There continues to be an old-fashioned but powerful prejudice against hire purchase on the part of the very class of people who are most justified in employing it'. Presumably those most justified in approaching motor dealers to purchase a car

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<sup>[32]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 3 November 1920.

on hire purchase would have been the financially secure, respectable middle-classes, but

Dislike of local knowledge that they have not paid cash is the explanation of numerous importations into agents' districts, which are mistakenly attributed to price-cutting. Great Portland Street, Euston Road, and the other motor marts of London and provincial centres, provide for the hire-purchaser the impersonality and privacy that belong to crowds ...has the name 'hire purchase' an objectionable sound? To the plain business man, it hasn't, but it may conceivably be 'not quite naice' to ears less habituated to hearing spades called spades.<sup>[33]</sup>

Once again dealers were advised to be discreet when using hire purchase. The suggestion offered on this occasion was that traders use advertising to stress that deferred payment schemes were carried out in the strictest confidence. The SMMT also noticed the phenomenon of the attraction of London for hire purchase buyers. They reported, that in 1938, 34 per cent of new cars sold within the London region were purchased by customers whose homes were outside the area.<sup>[34]</sup> They were obviously curious about these figures as they noted that in future, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Transport, there would be data available for London and Middlesex.

It is of course possible that London simply had a popularity amongst car buyers because it offered a wider choice of models. But, if that was so, trade insiders did not make reference to it, focusing instead on hire purchase. The evidence provided by Robson's motoring memoirs, oral and other informants, the motoring and trade press and the figures for London sales indicate that despite its

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<sup>[33]</sup> *Garage And Motor Agent*, 2 March 1935.

<sup>[34]</sup> Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, *The Motor Industry of Great Britain 1939* (1940), p. 85.

wide use hire purchase remained a subject requiring delicate handling by all concerned. The question is: how many sales were lost through this ambivalence? Did many potential buyers postpone their entry into the car market due to uneasiness about hire purchase? To seek possible solutions to these questions it is necessary to probe the attitudes of motor traders, manufacturers and the financial establishment towards deferred payment schemes.

Motor dealers greatly preferred cash paying customers, there being several reasons for this. Obviously cash in the bank was preferable to awaiting outstanding payments. There was also much confusion, particularly in the 1920s, about the legal situation with regard to hire purchase. Many dealers feared fraud by unscrupulous buyers, who might be tempted to resell a car just acquired under the hire purchase system.<sup>[35]</sup> When this did occur it was very often the trader who was left with the financial consequences. The United Dominions Trust (UDT), the largest finance house involved in motor-related hire purchasing, ensured that all agreements were drawn up between the customer and the trader. These business concerns created a degree of insecurity around instalment payments which contributed to an atmosphere of ambivalence towards hire purchase that paralleled that demonstrated by car-buyers. Doubts also emanated from the same concerns that determined the behaviour of middle-class consumers. Most obviously, as has already been intimated, fears of offending the economic and social sensibilities of potential customers led dealers to soft-pedal on the issue of hire purchase. So, although dealers appreciated that the

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<sup>[35]</sup> S. Bowden and M. Collins 'The Bank of England, industrial regeneration, and hire purchase between the wars', *Economic History Review*, XLV, (1992), pp. 120-136.

future of their business involved embracing hire purchase, that embrace was at times a little tentative.

They were particularly suspicious of schemes suggested as a means of expanding the market beyond those with high incomes. On occasions when such initiatives were submitted they were met with criticisms which carried more than a hint of class prejudice. In 1924 Ford's 'Weekly Purchase Plan' was greeted with hostility by 'Ford Dealer', in an article in *Motor Trader*. For a minimum payment of £1, over two and a quarter years, the plan enabled customers to take delivery of a Ford car. 'Ford Dealer' believed it was 'really very difficult to examine the scheme seriously as it appears to be so obviously unsound and impossible'. However, it was admitted that dealers had earlier considered hire purchase itself to be unworkable. The language of the article then becomes very revealing:

To turn down the scheme because it is *undignified* is also unwise because we do many things in everyday life that our grandfathers would not have touched for this reason..... The understanding of the scheme - that it enables a man of small means(say from £250-600 per annum) to purchase a car - might have a grain of substance in it if it were not for the fact that *any man who is so financially weak in this way has no business to buy a car at all....*a man who cannot pay..this small sum (the £25 deposit on a Ford hire purchase deal) must be in a very bad way and *an undesirable customer*.<sup>[36]</sup>

The language used here is very interesting because it illustrates a distrust, not only of the Ford scheme, but also those who might have used it. The whole concept was viewed as the type of new American business methods which past generations of British businessmen would not have sullied their ledgers with. Such schemes would carry an increased element of risk for traders, but arguments opposing the extension of hire purchase frequently articulated fears about greater risk in terms of the

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<sup>[36]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 26 March 1924. (Italics added).

potential dishonesty of customers attracted by innovations in instalment buying. An argument grounded entirely on economic rationale might have been expected to raise, instead, the subject of high running costs and the ability of less wealthy motorists to meet them. This would have been particularly relevant in the case of the Model T, which attracted the very high horsepower tax rating of £23 per annum. Ironically, in the United States of America, the Ford Weekly Plan had been established because Henry Ford disapproved of the concept of hire purchase<sup>[37]</sup>. By June 1924, 80,000 Americans had received delivery of their car by this means, and a further 170,000 were in the process of paying for one.

In 1929 *Garage and Motor Agent* argued against the extension of hire purchase payment plans. It urged that eighteen months be the maximum time allowed for the completion of payment, again referring to the potential dishonesty of customers, who might be attracted by instalment plans of up to three years in length:

Such terms attract those who *can* afford to run a car, although they have little capital and yet repulse the undesirable element which has little hope and less intention of ratifying the agreements into which it enters.<sup>[38]</sup>

In a well known comment on British car-buyers of this era, cited earlier, Miles Thomas suggested that their motto was: 'No one wants to keep down with the Joneses!' It would seem that many dealers were reluctant to do business with the Joneses in the first place. A solidly upper-middle-class market provided motor dealers with a lucrative trade in accessories, repairs and fuel. For this reason dealers

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<sup>[37]</sup> Martha L. Olney, 'Credit as a Production-Smoothing Device: The Case of Automobiles, 1913-1938', *Journal of Economic History*, 49 (1989), p. 389.

<sup>[38]</sup> *Garage and Motor Agent*, 17 August 1929.



were content with the policy of price/model competition which developed in the 1930s. Indeed *Motor Trader* advocated formal price fixing in 1934 arguing that:

the vast bulk of car dealers of the country are not anxious to see any reductions in prices, especially in the case of small and inexpensive cars. They would much prefer to hear that the leading manufacturers of cars of that type had come to an informal agreement or understanding among themselves to raise prices by 5 or 10 per cent....<sup>[39]</sup>

In 1935 Triumph's sales director Maurice Newnham played on traders' concerns about the nature of their customers, when extolling the merits of the Triumph Gloria to dealers. He described it as a medium priced car that would achieve a cachet of its own, pointing out that in the previous decade car production had risen by 134 per cent but total retail value had grown by only 14 per cent. He asked them to consider what this meant to them as dealers. Low priced cars would sell well of course, but by selling the Triumph Gloria they would build up a wealthier clientele.<sup>[40]</sup>

As Martha L. Olney has pointed out, manufacturers initially viewed hire purchase as a means of ensuring a smoother cash flow.<sup>[41]</sup> This was particularly the case in Britain, where throughout the interwar period large numbers of cars were bought in late spring, or following the Motor Show in October and November. Dealers were also forced into dealing with finance companies in order to pay in advance for the stock they were to receive from the manufacturers. Hire purchase was not, therefore, simply introduced as an aid to extending the market, but also as

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<sup>[39]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 11 July 1934.

<sup>[40]</sup> *ibid.*, 14 August 1935.

<sup>[41]</sup> Olney, 'Credit as a Production-Smoothing Device'. See also Bowden, 'The Inter-War Car Industry', note 38.

a means of regulating cash flow. There is no doubt that the extension of hire purchase facilities was extremely important in the growth of the motor vehicle market, but the ambivalent attitude of consumers towards its use does seem to have reinforced both dealers' resistance to projected extensions of the instalment principle and manufacturers' reluctance to trumpet hire purchase in advertising campaigns. One 1934 article in *Motor Trader* made this point explicitly, citing trader reluctance for the absence of a campaign to push this form of sale.<sup>[42]</sup> It remains questionable whether or not a campaign to publicise and de-stigmatise hire purchase might have increased sales of new cars in the 1920s and 1930s, or whether the social sensibilities of middle-class consumers were simply too resistant to such a ploy. Many buyers were clearly prepared, out of necessity, to make use of hire purchase when purchasing a family car, but they were extremely reluctant to acknowledge it. If a manufacturer had broken ranks and trumpeted their hire purchase facilities, or offered lengthier instalments, would they have found their cars stigmatised in a middle-class market where both business and social sensibilities were so important?

There is little evidence to suggest that manufacturers considered extending the length of hire purchase payment plans. If they did, the fact that so many companies dealt with the UDT would have been an important factor.<sup>[43]</sup> Their managing director, J. Gibson Jarvie, was a familiar figure to readers of the trade press where he campaigned on behalf of his company and hire purchase. Innovative as the

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<sup>[42]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 10 October. 1934.

<sup>[43]</sup> By 1929 they ran hire purchase schemes for Austin, Chrysler, Crossley, Darracq, Dodge Bros., Essex, Fiat, Hudson, Lea Francis, Morris, Renault, Rhose, Singer, Sunbeam, Talbot, and Wolseley. S. Bowden and M. Collins, 'The Bank of England, Industrial Regeneration, and Hire Purchase Between The Wars.', *Economic History Review*, XLV, (1992), p. 125.

company was, they were careful to appeal to traditional banking virtues, as the bulk of their financial backing emanated from City institutions. When they received further backing from the Bank of England, in January 1930, they felt that they had achieved full respectability within the City. Montagu Norman, the governor of the Bank of England, had been under pressure, from the Labour government, to set a lead for the financial sector in the reorganisation of British industry. He chose to back the UDT because of its combination of innovation and traditional virtues and, importantly, because of their insistence that they did not finance luxuries. A memo sent to his deputy reveals this aspect of his thinking:

Of course the Company has not in the past, and will not in the future, finance luxury products. Its motor car business has not been luxury business, e.g., delivery vans, doctors' cars, commercial travellers', etc.<sup>[44]</sup>

This last point sat uneasily with the fact that cars were very much seen as a leisure item in this period. For example, Winston Churchill's raid on the Road Fund in his 1926 budget was justified as the taxation of a luxury hobby in a time of national need.<sup>[45]</sup> However, the UDT's repudiation of the financing of luxury goods suggests that it had more than just bad debtors to consider when setting the payment plan for instalment purchases. As early as 1927 Jarvie had urged traders to dismiss notions of no deposit hire purchase sales, arguing that if people couldn't raise the necessary 25 per cent they couldn't 'by any stretch of the imagination be considered

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<sup>[44]</sup> B.O.E., G1/330, 128, 'Points for the Deputy Governor concerning United Dominions Trust', undated, pp.1-2. Cited in Bowden and Collins, 'The Bank of England and Hire Purchase', p. 129.

<sup>[45]</sup> W. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics* (1973), Ch. 9 *passim*.

desirable hire purchasers'.<sup>[46]</sup> Furthermore, the UDT and other finance houses imposed a system of qualitative and quantitative credit rationing. The preferred hire purchaser was a householder who owned a business and was married with children. Such types were seen as having the greatest incentive to complete payments.<sup>[47]</sup> Jarvie also believed in 'cooperation' - the stifling of domestic competition behind existing tariff walls<sup>[48]</sup> - so he must have felt at home dealing with motor manufacturers, who competed on model differentiation as much as price and relied heavily on the McKenna duties to limit the impact of foreign competition. Such shared attitudes were hardly conducive to experimentation with more innovative selling techniques than those employed by competitors. The UDT had the funds to invest in an extension of the time scale on hire purchase agreements but not the inclination of themselves, the Bank of England, motor manufacturers or dealers.<sup>[49]</sup> In mid-1933, for example, the UDT was using only 15-20 per cent of the credit facilities available to it from financial institutions. Also, as Lewchuck has shown, motor manufacturers chose to divert large percentages of their profits towards shareholders' dividends rather than reinvest them in mass production techniques.<sup>[50]</sup> Theoretically, at least, the manufacturers could have attempted market extension by extending hire purchase payments to ease the burden on buyers.

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[46] *Garage and Motor Agent*, June 1927.

[47] S. Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', in P. Johnson (ed), *C20th Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (Singapore, 1994), p. 254.

[48] Bowden and Collins, 'The Bank of England and Hire Purchase', p. 132.

[49] *ibid.*, p. 132.

[50] W.A. Lewchuck, 'The Motor Vehicle Industry', in B. Elbaum and W. Lazonick, (eds), *The Decline of the British Economy* (Oxford, 1986), p. 147.

## The Social Background of Car Owners Reappraised

If hire purchase terms had been eased would there have been enough new customers to make the move worthwhile? In the late 1930s the SMMT had decided, as they had always done, that potential car-buyers would come from a clearly defined middle-class section of the population. They assumed that anyone earning less than £250, to take 1938 as an example, would be unable to afford the purchase and running costs of a car. Such assumptions ignored the possibility that consumers are capable of restructuring finances and spending when a prized commodity comes within reach. Evidence gathered for this study from oral and other informants suggests that by the late 1930s ownership was a reality for a small, but significant, section of the wealthiest amongst the working classes. Many working-class consumers were willing to share the purchase or running costs of a car within the extended family, or amongst friends. For example, the Watkin brothers, both employed in the Coventry motor industry, shared the cost of a second-hand Standard Big Nine, bought for £47 from a workmate in 1936.<sup>[51]</sup> Another Coventry car-worker, Chris Bevan, owned a variety of cars towards the end of the 1930s including the rather flashy SS1.<sup>[52]</sup> As in the case of the Watkin brothers, Mr Bevan shared some of the costs of ownership with his brother. At another point he shared a car with a friend: the partnership only

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<sup>[51]</sup> *Interview Eleven* (Unrecorded), J.R. Watkin: b. 1907, Nottingham. (Interviewed 11th and 15th May 1992.)

<sup>[52]</sup> *Interview Ten*, Chris Bevan: b.1913, Hampshire. (Interviewed 23 November 1993),

breaking up when Mr Bevan's friend barred women from the car. Mr Bevan had wanted to offer a young woman a lift home from a dance and had asked his friend to oblige by sitting in the dickey-seat.<sup>[53]</sup>

We were at the Dun Cow, Stretton, pub and I met this girl and I was gonna take her home to Coventry - and asked him if he would get in the back and he said "Not bloomin likely!" So, I just went and told the girl I weren't taking her home. So that was what started him off. All the way home we argued, not enough to fight one another, but that was when it started. We had an understanding then: I said "Now, Tom we'll flog the car". "OK" he said. We never fell out otherwise, I still saw him a few times, but not so often, because er, I mean, I, we kept the car in his house in them days - he had a garage, I hadn't got one. So that was the end of the, really, friendship. We didn't fall out desperately but I didn't see him too much after that.

In other cases friends or associates offered financial help in meeting the prohibitive running costs of a car in return for its use on occasional weekends or family holidays. Mr Miller recalls his London childhood during which his father, a lorry driver, often borrowed an open-tourer Austin Seven for family outings: 'I gleaned in later years that in order to borrow the car my father helped his friend, who owned the car, with the cost of the insurance and road-fund tax and always returned the car with a full tank of petrol'.<sup>[54]</sup> In all, 11.1 per cent of informants provided examples where car-ownership had been facilitated by some form of car-sharing

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<sup>[53]</sup> *ibid.* A dickey-seat was a rather precarious and exposed small seat at the back of many early two-seater cars.

<sup>[54]</sup> *Letter One*, correspondence from John Miller, Bexleyheath, Kent, 19 November. 1991.

between friends or brothers.<sup>[55]</sup> In at least two, and probably three, of these cases the owners were working class. The fourth case involved a young teacher.<sup>[56]</sup>

Another possible path to car ownership involved husband and wife both being employed in relatively well-paid jobs, or one or the other securing employment in a second job. On this matter Bowden and Turner's use of household income statistics in their econometric model carries the risk of ignoring the possibility of contributions from wives, children or other relatives towards motoring costs. The sample includes a number of examples in which a wife's wage contributed to the finances of a car-owning family: the proportion once more standing at 11.1 per cent.<sup>[57]</sup> In a further 8.33 per cent of cases the wages of a working daughter or son provided a family with extra capital.<sup>[58]</sup> Furthermore, another 8.33 per cent of cases had fathers engaged in some form of second occupation which was not likely to feature in official income statistics.<sup>[59]</sup> Gay Parker recalls his father working simultaneously as a cinema projectionist and insurance agent, thereby financing the purchase of a second-hand Clyno in the 1930s. His mother was ambitious to own the car, but less pleased when it frequently required maintenance on the street outside the house, a task in which a mechanically-minded friend aided Mr Parker senior.<sup>[60]</sup> In several of these cases there was an overlap between fathers working in second jobs and some of the other

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<sup>[55]</sup> See Appendix One: Owners 13, 14, 25 and 28.

<sup>[56]</sup> The social class of owner 28 is uncertain although it is known that the running costs of the car were met in part by John Miller's father, a lorry driver.

<sup>[57]</sup> Owners 2, 3, 7 and 33.

<sup>[58]</sup> Owners 3, 6 and 8.

<sup>[59]</sup> Owners 2, 6 and 24.

<sup>[60]</sup> *Interview 7*: Gay Parker, b. 1931 (Gravesend). See also Owner 24.

factors identified here, suggesting that several of these families sought ways of financing a lifestyle they might not otherwise have been able to attain. Thus, Harold Poyser, a bus driver, was able to buy a Humber in the 1930s, only because his wife was employed as well. The mobility his car offered enabled him to supplement his income by trading in spare car-parts.<sup>[61]</sup> Mr Garner was a local government officer earning only £4 a week but he still managed to buy a family car. In his case the purchase was facilitated by the cash he earned playing in a dance band at weekends and through having a working son living at home.<sup>[62]</sup> So, if our sample is representative, in one-sixth of cases the income statistics may not have revealed the true car-owning potential of this group.

A further striking trend is the number of occasions in which car-owning families had some form of connection with the transport industry. In 36.1 per cent of cases owners worked in a job connected with motoring or had friends or relations who could help with costs, advise on purchasing, or otherwise facilitate the chances of car ownership.<sup>[63]</sup> Extrapolating from this it would seem highly likely that the incidence of lower-middle or working-class car-ownership was appreciably higher amongst those with such affiliations. This is surely no coincidence, as their proximity to motor vehicles enabled them to amass the knowledge that made a foray into the largely middle-class pastime of motoring a possibility. For them the automobile, of one sort or another, bore no great mystique and the fact that others around them began to take up motoring placed it on their agenda of possible leisure activities.

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[61] Owner 2.

[62] Owner 6.

[63] Owners 2, 3, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 21, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 36.



Most importantly, a knowledge of the technology, a familiarity with establishments where cheap cars could be bought and an ability to maintain the car may well have made the difference between buying a cheap second-hand car or not. Coventry car-worker Chris Bevan described the process by which he chose a car in the 1930s:

Well, most of the time er I would look in the paper, and, er, look at the car sales in the paper. And have a look at that, or we also used to go to the car sales occasionally. There was one at the Motor Mart years ago, up here, once a week, you'd go there and have, look, see if there's any bargains going. But the scrap merchants used to sell second-hand cars, I bought, er, I bought a big Austin Cambridge once from a scrap yard. I don't think you'd give above £10 for it, and I took all my relations down to Bournemouth for a week's holiday and went back the next week and brought them home in it, so it wasn't a bad old car that one. Er, I kept it for perhaps a few months and then I would change it again for something else.<sup>[64]</sup>

Employed as a clerical worker in the motor trade Tony Bird was as equally at ease buying or selling cheap second-hand cars:

Before the war I was living in the Worthing area....There was a marvellous breaker's yard, run by a man called Percy Vokes - he was quite well known and you could get almost anything from him. And I remember, in the 1930s, I had bought an Austin Seven Swallow, quite cheaply, and I hadn't had the opportunity to collect it and when I was visiting Percy Vokes' breakers yard I saw something like the end of a cigar sticking out and I said "What's that Percy?" "Oh" he said, "its a French car, an Amilcar. Its a French sports car. Driving wheels are stripped. Apart from that its alright." So, I said "How about swapping it for an Austin Seven Swallow?" "Oh, don't mind", he said "yes".... Yes, it was really what was available against what took your fancy.<sup>[65]</sup>

Information provided by informants makes it possible to assess the social class of the owner in 12 of the 13 cases in which there were motor industry connections.

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<sup>[64]</sup> *Interview Ten*: Chris Bevan, b. 1911 (Interviewed November 23 1993). Owner 13.

<sup>[65]</sup> *Interview Three*: Tony Bird, b. London 1931 (Interviewed February 15 1992). Owner 27.

Two were professionals,<sup>[66]</sup> three were from the commercial middle-classes,<sup>[67]</sup> three were in lower-middle or white collar occupations,<sup>[68]</sup> four were in working-class occupations<sup>[69]</sup> and one's trade is unknown, although the costs of this owner's car were shared with a working-class friend.<sup>[70]</sup>

An occupational analysis of the total sample reveals that Bowden and Turner are right to suggest that the professional and commercial middle-classes were prominent amongst the car-owning community, 55.55 per cent of the sample emanating from these groups.<sup>[71]</sup> A further 19.4 per cent were employed in lower-middle-class or white-collar occupations.<sup>[72]</sup> In addition, 5.55 per cent of owners were non-salaried women in affluent middle-class families.<sup>[73]</sup>

However, if this sample is anywhere near representative, it also suggests that by the end of the 1930s car-ownership was a possibility for many amongst the working class who were in well-paid jobs or were in a position where some form of car-sharing was possible, and preferably both. The sample includes 16.66 per cent

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<sup>[66]</sup> Owners 21 and 36.

<sup>[67]</sup> Owners 3, 16 and 29.

<sup>[68]</sup> Owners 9, 12 and 27.

<sup>[69]</sup> Owners 2, 13, 14 and 26.

<sup>[70]</sup> Owner 28.

<sup>[71]</sup> Owners 6, 8, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 31, 33, 36 being employed in a professional capacity; Owners 1, 3, 4, 5, 16, 22, 29, 30, 32 were engaged in business.

<sup>[72]</sup> Owners 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 24 and 27.

<sup>[73]</sup> Owners 18 and 35.

of owners who were in working-class trades.<sup>[74]</sup> It is also important to note that these working-class owners bought cheap second-hand cars and may have drifted in and out of ownership according to their ability to finance running-costs. Car-sharing between working-class brothers or friends may have come to end, for instance, if one of the partners in the endeavour got married or began saving for their wedding. Many amongst the lower-middle-class owners might also have experienced this pattern of intermittent ownership.

Writing about working-class car-ownership in the 1960s, Ferdinand Zweig made three points which tally with the findings reported here. Firstly, he found that ownership levels were greatest amongst the Vauxhall workers he studied, as opposed to workers in other industries. Secondly, he identified single men or married men with no children as more likely to have a car. Finally, he found car-sharing was a significant practice, as many as four workers having part-ownership.<sup>[75]</sup>

The wide social composition of the sample presented here, if anywhere near representative of general trends, would certainly do much to explain the surprise, often expressed in interwar Britain at the continual ability of the private-car market to avoid reaching saturation point.<sup>[76]</sup> PEP also remarked on this phenomenon, describing the SMMT's belief that car-ownership could not reach those earning less than £250 p.a. in the late 1930s as 'natural, if rash'. They believed that many single

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<sup>[74]</sup> Owners 2, 7, 13, 14, 26, 34. It is also possible that owner 28 was from a working class background.

<sup>[75]</sup> F. Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society* (1961), p. 104.

<sup>[76]</sup> *Economist* was one periodical which frequently registered its surprise over this issue. For a brief summary of its annual surveys of the motor industry see M. Adeney, *The Motor Makers* (1989), p. 94.

and childless men below the £250 'social dividing line' must have been able to afford small, mainly second-hand cars.<sup>[77]</sup> Our evidence suggests that this was indeed the case.

Further qualitative evidence exists, supporting both the concept of car-sharing and the notion that familiarity with the car, allied to relatively high wages in the motor industry, led to ownership amongst significant numbers of the working class.<sup>[78]</sup> Newspapers occasionally included information about car-drivers' occupations when reporting on proceedings at inquests or in the courts. It has been possible to discover details about one hundred and sixty motorists in this way. This information is reproduced in full in Appendix Two. However, the weight that has been attached to the sample reported above has not been given to this second group for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the motorists in this sample can not be questioned about their experiences. There is also the possibility of inaccuracy in the press reports. Furthermore, certain occupational groups were involved in more accidents and were charged with more offences than other groups because they drove their cars more frequently. It is no surprise therefore to discover that 20 per cent of this group were identified as commercial travellers or salesmen.<sup>[79]</sup> Drivers who used their cars solely for leisure would appear less often in such a sample. However, with these provisos in mind it is interesting to note that in almost 12 per cent of these

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<sup>[77]</sup> Political and Economic Planning, *Motor Vehicles* (1950), p. 58.

<sup>[78]</sup> Average weekly adult male earning in the motor industry were; 1924 - 74.835 shillings; 1930 - 72.625; 1935 - 80.64. J. Foreman-Peck, 'The Effects of Market Failure on the British Motor Industry before 1939.' , p. 278.

<sup>[79]</sup> Appendix Two: Drivers 8, 10, 12, 17, 23, 31, 34, 35, 41, 43, 56, 67, 70, 76, 79, 82, 83, 87, 90, 94, 102, 103, 104, 107, 112, 123, 137, 144, 148, 151, 152, 153.

cases the driver's occupation was a working class or artisanal one.<sup>[80]</sup> In almost half of these situations the individual's employment had motoring or transport associations.<sup>[81]</sup> This included three, and possibly four, cases involving policemen whose work was making them increasingly familiar with the car.<sup>[82]</sup> Further cases offer possible evidence of multiple incomes facilitating family ownership.<sup>[83]</sup> Others offer further possible examples of car-sharing taking place.<sup>[84]</sup>

Contemporary observers were not totally unaware of car-ownership amongst the working classes. Reporting on a London Transport Strike in 1937, the *Hampstead Gazette* visited pickets at the Edgware bus depot and found that they had set up a system for taking people to hospitals or other urgent business: 'quite a few of the busmen have their own cars and these are used to convey the working-class members of the public to their destinations'.<sup>[85]</sup>

In the House of Commons' debate on an increase in the level of the horsepower tax in 1939 several Labour M.P.s attacked the increase as 'impositions upon the poorer sections of the people who use mechanically propelled vehicles'.

Herbert Parker, the member for Romford, argued:

There are now a good many people not belonging to the wealthier classes who use motor-cycles and motor cars. Among the 12,000

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<sup>[80]</sup> *ibid.*, Drivers 18, 25, 37, 40, 47, 53, 80, 97, 98, 105, 111, 125, 132, 145, 150, 155, 156, 158, 160.

<sup>[81]</sup> *ibid.*, Drivers 40, 80, 97, 111, 125, 132 150, 156, 160.

<sup>[82]</sup> *ibid.*, Drivers 125, 132, 156 and possibly 150 where the bus-driver owner had lent his car to a policeman.

<sup>[83]</sup> *ibid.*, Drivers 16, 99, 155, 160.

<sup>[84]</sup> *ibid.*, Drivers 37 53, 62, 105, 132, 150, 156.

<sup>[85]</sup> *Hampstead Gazette*, 7 MAY 1937.

workers in the Ford works at Dagenham there are 1,500 to 2,000 who possess motor cars of their own....

Colonel Nathan, M.P. for Wandsworth, supported this viewpoint, describing the prohibitive effect the increase would have on the many owners of second-hand cars: 'cars are bought by artisans and work people for £15 or £10, or even £7 10s and I have known them go as low as £5'.<sup>[86]</sup> Several members on the government benches felt that Parker and Nathan were overstating their case but literary evidence supports them. In 1935, when the journalist Ivor Brown made a literary tour of England he noted that:

A journey along the main road from the East Coast to London on a Sunday evening in summer is a tedious business, owing to the density of traffic, but instructive. Myriads of East Enders packed seven or eight in an antiquated car which has been bought for a few pounds and seems almost to be held together by string and straps, are jogging home from a day at Clacton or Southend..the cars are..heavily charged with conglomerate uncles and aunts, children bunched like bananas...Thirty years ago these people never left the town, except perhaps for one week in the year. Saturday night was spent in the gin-palace and Sunday morning was spent in sleeping it off. [But such is] The new democratic week-end, even if it be mainly devoted to covering decent sand with orange peel and cigarette cartons...'<sup>[87]</sup>

## Conclusion

It is tempting to assume that these alleged descendants of 'gin-palace revellers' were perhaps Ford employees and their families engaged in the type of ad hoc car sharing outlined above which suggest that there was a demand for cars outside the social

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<sup>[86]</sup> Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, fifth series, 2 May 1939: Cols.1816-27.

<sup>[87]</sup> I.Brown, *The Heart Of England* (1935), p. 75.

groups identified by the SMMT. However, the manufacturers and dealers did not respond to such developments in the market. Beneath the discussions about its utility value the car was firmly entangled in a web of middle-class mores and meanings. Perhaps greatest amongst these was that the car was an expression of its owner's individuality and position in society. So any campaign to sell cars, even used cars, on a cooperative basis with several friends, workmates, or members of an extended family, sharing the expensive running costs was out of the question. Dealers and manufacturers were involved in the sale of a prestige, luxury item and continuously sought to portray their cars as such. Any radical plan to sell cars on a joint ownership basis, would have tarnished their product in the status-conscious world of middle-class motoring.

However, a liberalisation of hire purchase terms, allied to a publicity campaign to de-stigmatise its use in both new and second-hand car sales could have attracted more lower-middle-class buyers, in particular. It will be remembered that Bowden and Turner expressed some surprise at the lower-middle-class coefficients in their model, which were low. By extending hire purchase payment plans manufacturers and dealers would have provided themselves with an outlet for cars which otherwise sat in showrooms for long periods awaiting the attentions of a socially-acceptable buyer.

Social historical analysis, allied to a sense of the symbolic value the car could have, suggests a number of important provisos should be attached to Bowden and Turner's conclusions. Concerns about hire purchase, emanating from cultural and economic sources, produced, an uneasiness about this form of financing a move into car-ownership. However, it is impossible to say how many potential middle-class

car-buyers allowed the stigma surrounding hire purchase to delay or prevent their entry into motoring, although Bowden and Turner's surprise at what they believe were low levels of ownership amongst the lower-middle-classes might be at least partly explained by the evidence and arguments submitted here. It should also be recalled that the quantitative and qualitative credit rationing employed by finance houses such as the UDT must also have served to restrict sales. It would be interesting to learn what proportion of applicants for hire purchase were turned down through one of the more subjective elements of this rationing. Jarvie's stipulations about solid, respectable hire purchasers were intended to establish his company's form of instalment paying as 'quite distinct from the working-class "tick" system of accounts'<sup>[88]</sup> but it also ensured that even some professional groups, who were not recipients of a regular income, were deemed a credit risk.

Equally significant were anxieties amongst traders, manufacturers, and the financial institutions, which prevented the introduction of further schemes, which could have given rise to more rapid market extension. As has been shown, some consumers devised their own radical strategies to attain car-ownership, most commonly acquiring cheap second-hand models. The proponents of econometric analysis are of course correct to stress the essentially middle-class nature of the market, but the question they pose and the model constructed to answer it, drawn from consumer demand theory, is essentially tautologous. Of course a consumer has to have enough money in order to buy something at the prevailing price. But what if, as in cases cited here, consumers were prepared to share the costs of such a prized commodity? Alternatively what if technological knowledge or connections with the

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<sup>[88]</sup> Bowden and Turner, 'UK Demand for Consumer Durables', p. 253.



motor industry provided them with valuable information on where cheap models could be picked up, or enabled them to cut costs by doing their own repairs? The findings outlined so far suggest that the diffusion of cars can not simply be represented in a pyramid-shape, where upper-class ownership is followed by a trickle down effect through the middle classes until working-class ownership becomes a possibility in the final mass-market stage. Of course, this image reflects the general pattern, but it is clear that many in the working classes were car-owners before others in middle-class groups who might have been expected to have been before them in the waiting list. The same qualification would also apply to those in lower-middle-class occupations, such as Tony Bird, whose connection with the motor industry also enabled him to find bargain-basement cars and maintain them on a modest salary.

There should also be a reappraisal of Bowden and Turner's contention that cars were seen as a necessity, by the late 1930s, by only the professional and commercial middle-classes. The appearance, in our sample, of significant numbers from outside these sections of society indicates the advisability of this exercise. In the next chapter this re-evaluation will be attempted. Questions asked should include: why does something become accepted as a necessity by a class? and where can a line be drawn between the utility and symbolic values of a consumer good such as a motor car? Cultural norms, class perceptions and taste were all factors in the spread of such a significant consumer item. Middle-class culture and taste fashioned the way a car looked and to some extent they also defined the ways in which it could be sold. In the process areas where growth in ownership could have occurred were limited. In the next chapter the uses to which cars were put in this period will be examined and an attempt made to assess both symbolic and utilitarian dimensions of those uses.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **‘The Right Crowd and No Crowding’. Uses of the Car: Its Utilitarian and Symbolic Value**

## Introduction

Having described how the motoring classes emerged it is now time to explain some of the uses that were found for the car in this period. In examining this aspect of the consumption of the car the dichotomy set up by Bowden and Turner between the car as luxury or necessity will be examined once more. Was the car simply a necessity in getting from A to B or did it also have symbolic uses in terms of providing its owners with distinction, setting them apart symbolically and physically from non-owners? The theme of restructuring family finances, in order to enjoy some of the opportunities offered by the car, will also reappear as it is seen that many families were prepared to forego holidays or otherwise reshape leisure and consumption patterns.

It is clear that, even by the late 1930s, the majority of cars were bought for leisure rather than business use. Sales to commercial travellers, doctors, farmers and others were estimated to stand at between 25 and 40 per cent of in sales in the mid to late 1930s.<sup>[1]</sup> Of course, even in occupations where the car would seem to have a predominantly utility value, as opposed to any measure of symbolic worth, it is possible to envisage cases where the latter was also a factor in the ownership or choice of car. A prime example of this would be one already drawn upon, based upon Bowden and Turner's identification of strong professional coefficients in areas

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[1] *Economist*, December 7 1935. Political and Economic Planning, *Motor Vehicles* (1950), pp. 58-9. J. Foreman-Peck, S. Bowden and A. McKinlay, *The British Motor Industry* (Manchester, 1995), p. 68.

Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

where medium and larger sized cars sold best in 1937.<sup>[2]</sup> Quite obviously there is no reason why a professional should need a bigger car to transport them around meetings. It seems clear that initially car ownership, per se, was enough to confer a successful image. Once ownership grew more widespread larger, expensive models became more attractive in this respect. In their analysis, Bowden and Turner describe what they believe was the transforming professional conception of the car, from luxury to necessity. This use of the term necessity can be usefully interrogated. When discussing diffusion patterns most economists prefer to refer to a change in a commodity's status from 'luxury good' to 'normal good' rather than 'necessity'. The symbolic utility value of the car for the interwar middle-class professional becomes plain when the position of the car in terms of 'substitute goods' is assessed. Substitute goods are those which might be used by the consumer as an alternative. In this case buses, trains, motorcycles and even bicycles come into the equation. The car may well have been superior in many ways to each of these alternatives but their availability implies that the car was not a necessity as such, particularly for many professionals whose job did not require mobility. Adapting the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it will be argued the middle classes existed in a social world which judged people by their capacity to consume as much by their capacity for production.<sup>[3]</sup>

Leisure uses of the car will be central to this analysis, firstly, because the majority of cars, even by the late 1930s, were still bought primarily for leisure purposes. Secondly, Bourdieu suggests that leisure practices are not appendages of

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<sup>[2]</sup> S. Bowden and P. Turner, 'Some Cross-Section Evidence On The Determinants Of The Diffusion Of Car Ownership In The Inter-War UK Economy', *Business History*, 35, (1993), p. 67.

<sup>[3]</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984).

an existent lifestyle, they are integral to the construction and affirmation of social position. Leisure pursuits are social practices by which class fractions announce and establish a position within the social world. Despite the qualifications made in the last chapter, motoring was a predominantly middle-class pursuit, but the middle class will not be portrayed as a homogenous grouping. Instead it is necessary to understand the extent to which being middle class depended on 'an extremely anxious production of endless discriminations between people who [were] constantly assessing each other's standing. The grocer's wife in Grantham, the female bank clerk in the metropolis, the retired memsahib in Surrey'<sup>[4]</sup> were far more likely to be aware of differences between each other than their shared attitudes.

### **A Golden Age of Motoring or an Era of Privileged Consumption?**

The estimates cited above from the *Economist* and PEP suggest that at most 40 per cent of cars were bought by those who might have been expected to use them primarily for utilitarian purposes. However, the manner in which even these purposes could have a symbolic function has also been identified.

The continuing importance of the car as a leisure item was also revealed by the seasonal variations in sales and licence figures. Even by the late 1930s, sales were at their highest level around the Easter period, the anticipation of better weather conjuring up thoughts of summer rides in the countryside. Large numbers of motorists also licensed their cars on a quarterly basis, thereby saving money and

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<sup>[4]</sup> A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991), p. 13.

illustrating that the car was often seen as a summer vehicle. In fact the trend for quarterly licensing seems to have increased during the period, a factor at odds with any attempt to ascribe growing ownership to greater perception of the utility of the car. Figures for quarterly (and part-yearly) licensing, produced here in Table One, reveal that a growing proportion of motorists only used their cars for leisure purposes. Whereas in 1924 virtually three cars in every four were licensed on an annual basis, by 1931 the figure had dropped to virtually one in two. After 1931 SMMT publications dropped these details from their annual statistics, preventing further analysis of this trend. Perhaps they were omitted as part of the industry's effort to remove the luxury image of motoring which governments had used to justify raids on the road fund?

As previously noted commentators from Thorstein Veblen to Pierre Bourdieu have recognised the symbolic dimension of the consumption of goods.<sup>[5]</sup> In interwar Britain the sociologist Henry Durant commentated on this area, arguing that competition permeated every area of social life. He wrote that 'when competition exists within a hierarchy it is accomplished by its opposite, emulation. Thus each person competes with those in the same rank and emulates those above them...'.<sup>[6]</sup> Interestingly, as an example of this process he cited the policy of annual model changes employed by motor manufacturers. Thus, for Durant, the car had a significant role to play in this process as a leisure provider.

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<sup>[5]</sup> T. Veblen, *The Leisure Class* (New York, 1899). P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984).

<sup>[6]</sup> H. Durant, *The Problem of Leisure* (1938), p. 38.

**Table One**  
**Number of Private Car Licences 1923-1931**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Annual Licences</b>	<b>Quarterly Licences</b>	<b>Part Year Licences</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1923</b>	226,976 (73.8%)	53,689 (17.5%)	26,811 (8.7%)	307,476
<b>1924</b>	285,777 (74.3%)	67,011 (17.4%)	31,982 (8.3%)	384,770
<b>1925</b>	312,421 (67.8%)	107,148 (23.2%)	41,701 (9.0%)	461,270
<b>1926</b>	355,927 (65.4%)	144,787 (26.6%)	43,578 (8.0%)	544,292
<b>1927</b>	390,771 (61.8%)	192,685 (30.5%)	48,958 (7.7%)	632,414
<b>1928</b>	433,322 (59.5%)	243,405 (33.5%)	50,873 (7.0%)	727,600
<b>1929</b>	460,401 (57.0%)	294,926 (36.4%)	53,362 (6.6%)	808,689
<b>1930</b>	481,434 (54.2%)	354,778 (40.0%)	51,405 (5.8%)	887,617
<b>1931</b>	502,792 (54.6%)	368,330 (40.0%)	49,989 (5.4%)	921,111

Source: Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, *The Motor Industry of Great Britain* (1932).

Competitive emulation is a necessary feature where social status is primarily determined by the capacity to consume, in other words, the amount of wealth possessed. If social prestige is to be secured and kept, it is necessary to shine in the leisure sphere, to stand out by a display of clothes, servants, wine, furniture and cars which compares favourably with that of those on the same social rung and if possible surpasses it. This rule holds good from the highest to the lowest.<sup>[7]</sup>

A study of the leisure uses found for cars will, therefore, further elucidate our understanding of the symbolic and utilitarian functions they had in this period.

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<sup>[7]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39.

Popular histories of motoring between the wars frequently focus on its role in leisure.<sup>[8]</sup> The period is seen as a 'golden age' of motoring when the roads were free of traffic and middle-class motorists were at liberty to explore the highways and byways of Britain. Even the economic historian Philip Bagwell adopted this rather rosy metaphor, in his brief estimate of the car's impact on interwar Britain. In his view the 1930s were in many ways 'the golden age of motoring' with opportunities to visit distant relatives and attain knowledge of the nation's cultural heritage as an ever increasing number of country houses were open to the public. 'The pattern of social life was rapidly changing. The English Sunday became much less an occasion for church going and much more an opportunity for a drive out of the smoky cities into the open country or down by the sea'.<sup>[9]</sup> However, in many of the accounts of the interwar period, the sense of loss felt for this motoring epoch seems also to be tinged with a tangible feeling of a lost era of middle-class privilege, when their exclusive ownership of cars enabled them not only to leave the 'smoky cities' but also the working- class inhabitants of those cities behind them. This mood was also evident in several of the oral interviews undertaken. Tony Bird, a motorist since the early 1930s offered the following observation:

I don't want to sound in any way snobbish about this but when you got motor cars in the hands of the sort of chap who would go down to the seaside in his braces with mum and the kids in the back and so on, I think the standard of road behaviour probably dropped a bit, if you see what I mean. Well, in exactly the same way the regard for the British

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<sup>[8]</sup> See for example, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, *The British Motorist* (Bristol, 1987) and A.B. Deamus, *Motoring in The Twenties and Thirties* (Tiptree, 1979).

<sup>[9]</sup> P. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770* (1974), p. 231.



overseas sort of diminished when the package tour became popular.<sup>[10]</sup>

As Ivor Brown's remarks on working-class motorists returning from Southend and Clacton reveal, contemporary observers could also share this attitude. Whenever the unexpected occurred and working-class motorists appeared on the road - on their way to cover 'decent sand with orange peel and cigarette cartons' - they were described in scornful and derisory language which revealed the author's unease with this early sign that the working classes could follow the middle classes down the path of car ownership. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* George Orwell commented on middle class fears of their declining social distinctiveness, citing working-class access to car ownership to illustrate his point.

Every middle class person has a dormant class-prejudice which needs only a small thing to arouse it and if he is forty he probably has a firm conviction that his own class has been sacrificed to the class below. Suggest to the average unthinking person of gentle birth, who is struggling to keep up appearances on four or five hundred a year, that he is a member of an exploiting parasite class, and he will think you are mad. In perfect sincerity he will point out to you a dozen ways in which he is worse-off than a working man. In his eyes the workers are not a submerged race of slaves, they are a sinister flood creeping upwards to engulf himself and his friends and his family and to sweep all culture and all decency out of existence. Hence that queer watchful anxiety lest the working class shall grow too prosperous. In a number of *Punch* soon after the war, there is a picture of four or five miners with grim, sinister faces riding in a cheap motor-car. A friend they are passing calls out and asks them where they have borrowed it. They answer "We've bought the thing!" This, you see, is "good enough for *Punch*"; for miners to buy a motor-car, even one between four or five of them, is a monstrosity, a sort of crime against nature. That was the attitude of a dozen years ago, and I see no fundamental change.<sup>[11]</sup>

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[10] *Interview Three*: Tony Bird, b. 1913 London (Interviewed February 15 1992).

[11] G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1973), pp. 133-4.

It is clear, therefore, that the golden age of motoring is something of a loaded metaphor which can be profitably questioned. It can be interpreted as evidence of a middle-class lament for a former age, where social distinctions were sharper and their status more obvious. Central to the ideal of the golden age is the notion that the interwar middle-class motoring family had the freedom to travel unhindered along the highways and byways of Britain, discovering beauty, history and personal peace of mind. However, as a variety of sources make clear, the reality was often very different, traffic jams, limited financial resources, or the poor facilities that often greeted the motorist causing frustration.

John Urry has argued that the cultural practices of tourism are constituted by a set of preferred social activities which are highly structured by distinctions of taste. He writes that '[s]uch practices lead people to want to be in certain places, gazing at particular objects, in the company of specific other types of people'.<sup>[12]</sup> In other words, this is a return to Henry Durant's understanding of competitive social status, ensuing in emulation and consumption, within your own social group, or the group above. As this was true of the types of car people chose to drive so it was also true of the uses they made of them.

Contemporary commentators frequently remarked upon the 'herd instinct' of the touring motorist. Though the motor car was enwrapped in ideas of individual freedom and was said to give the motoring family the chance to roam alone along the roads of Britain, it seems that all too often motoring families chose to travel the same popular roads. Reports of congestion were being made from the very early 1920s, with cars, as well as other forms of motorised transport, contributing to the problem.

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<sup>[12]</sup> J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), p. 66.

The earlier years of the period, in particular, were marked by roads that were inadequate for the increasing levels of motor traffic. John Flitcroft remembers the heavy holiday traffic that struggled across a bridge over the river Stour on route to Bournemouth during his childhood in the 1920s. The bridge had only one-way capacity and the RAC supervised crossing traffic, which often tailed back as far as half a mile.<sup>[13]</sup> Marjorie Clarke recalled how, in 1937, her fiancé's second-hand car finally packed up after being caught in a traffic jam in the popular South West of England.<sup>[14]</sup> In 1925 the motoring writer John Prioleau described a recent summer trip on the London to Brighton road:

One day last summer, it was my extraordinary ill-luck to drive up from Brighton to London in the evening between 6 o'clock and 9 o'clock, and as a result of those three appalling hours, I decided that nothing but "life and death" shall drag me, either in my own or someone else's car, to Brighton during the summer. From the Brighton Aquarium to St James's Street I was not for one moment out of what can only be described as a queue of private cars, and motor bikes of every sort and size, and more chars-a-bancs than I believed existed. Quite apart from the dust, the crowd, and above all the intolerable noise, the danger to everyone concerned was considerable.<sup>[15]</sup>

This example is of interest in two respects. First, it tempers the golden age imagery to some extent. Not only were roads narrower and of poorer quality than those of today, but if a motorist was unfortunate enough to end up in a traffic jam, the noise of dozens of interwar motor engines would have been most unpleasant. Secondly, it

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<sup>[13]</sup> *Interview Two*: John Flitcroft, b. 1919, Christchurch near Bournemouth (Interviewed February 11 1992).

<sup>[14]</sup> *Interview Seven*: Marjorie Clarke, b. 1915 Warrington (Interviewed August 10 1992). Also see correspondence from Mrs Clarke.

<sup>[15]</sup> J. Prioleau, *Motoring for women*, (1925), p. 77.

is indicative of the skewed impact that the car had in the South East of England where the affluent middle classes were to be found in the largest numbers. In 1938 just under twenty per cent of all households in this area owned a car compared with under twelve per cent in the North of England.<sup>[16]</sup>

The car offered owners the chance to express their status and their distinction from less wealthy groups in society. It provided this not only in terms of its own existence as a sought-after consumer product, but also in the opportunity it gave to owners to translate the social space between them and 'social inferiors' into geographical space. This was most clearly expressed in advertising for the socially exclusive Brooklands racing track which carried the legend 'The Right Crowd and No Crowding'.

However, for many motorists the new spatial freedom was achieved by cost cutting elsewhere in the family leisure budget and thus the freedom the car brought to middle-class pleasure-seekers was not entirely appreciated by the traditional commercial beneficiaries of the middle-class holiday. The car offered owners the ability to travel quickly to a resort and back home again on the same day, thereby eliminating the need for accommodation. Motorists often carried their own food and drink, much to the chagrin of the service sector in coastal towns. Whilst letters in the motoring press complained of the excessive charges for parking made by the councils of seaside resorts, the business communities of those towns cursed the picnicking tourists and their cars. For instance, in 1929 the *Yarmouth Independent* attacked motorists who visited their town, spent little and left only litter, to be cleared

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<sup>[16]</sup> S. Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', in P. Johnson (ed) *Twentieth Century Britain*, p. 248.

away at local expense.<sup>[17]</sup> A further cause for concern, to the resorts that had been the traditional destinations of middle-class holiday-makers, was the opportunity the private car gave for exploration of new destinations, whether smaller coastal towns or the historic highways and byways of rural Britain. The railways had concentrated provision for holidays in a comparatively small number of large resorts, each with their own place in the social spectrum: Bournemouth, Torquay, Scarborough and Southport were amongst those popular with the middle classes. Rising car ownership allowed the continuation of this social segregation of seaside resorts, it also generated increased interest in resorts off the beaten track, such as Newquay and St Ives.<sup>[18]</sup> Increasing working-class utilisation of the charabanc and cheap excursion trains exacerbated this tendency, as Alan A. Jackson has noted.

This development caused the beleaguered middle classes to range still further afield, to Devon and Cornwall, west and north west Wales and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, or to strengthen their hold on existing bastions such as Frinton, Southwold, Aldeburgh, Sheringham, Seaview, Sidmouth, Deal and Rye.<sup>[19]</sup>

As has been seen, for many, car ownership was only possible by combining incomes and, or, making savings elsewhere in family spending. It is likely, therefore, that ownership increased the incidence of day trips at the expense of more extended holidays by the sea or elsewhere. This was certainly the case for the families of oral interviewees: less than half of them recalled extended family holidays

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<sup>[17]</sup> *Yarmouth Independent*, 11 May 1929.

<sup>[18]</sup> H. Perkin, *The Age of the Automobile*, (1976), p. 155-8.

<sup>[19]</sup> A.A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950*, (Nairn, 1991), p. 299.

once car ownership was attained.<sup>[20]</sup> For them the value of a car outside the front door could offer more in terms of social kudos than a week by the sea, out of sight of the neighbours.

Whilst oral interviews provide one indicator of the restructuring of consumption patterns by middle-class motoring families, the trade press of the hotel trade offers an insight into this phenomenon from another perspective. It is clear that many hoteliers, and others who previously relied upon the comparatively static nature of the typical holiday-maker, resented both the flexibility offered by the car and the important place it took in family budgeting decisions. *Hotel* returned to the subject of the motor car repeatedly throughout the 1930s.<sup>[21]</sup> It is clear that this section of the hotel trade targeted a particular middle-class market segment and that their concerns about growing car ownership centred on three issues. The first of these to surface, in 1932, was an anxiety over the increase of the 'touring habit' by cars, motor-bikes and bicycles and the concomitant growing tendency for such travellers to stay for one night only, causing greater uncertainty for hotel owners. The motoring organisations responded to this trend, producing a growing range of touring itineraries which catered for the differing budgets of their membership. The standard AA itinerary simply followed the most direct route available, but for holiday purposes a series of options were offered. Some itineraries tendered a fairly direct route from A to B but with an attempt to provide as much scenery as possible. Alternatively,

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<sup>[20]</sup> Interviewees: 3, 5, 7, 9 and 10 - (Owners 13, 20, 25, 26, 27).

<sup>[21]</sup> This was a monthly magazine published from 1932 as *British Boarding House Proprietor and Private Hotelier*. In 1933 it became *Hotel and Boarding House* and in 1937 it was renamed *Hotel*. Throughout this chapter it will be referred to as *Hotel*.

members could request an itinerary covering a predetermined number of days with the distances to be undertaken also subject to the individual's discretion. A further possibility were the *Day Drive Booklets* which offered recommended day drives from a large number of towns which were used as touring centres. Examples cited in 1935 included Brighton, Oban, Monmouth, Scarborough, Torquay and the Lake District. The final alternative was the 'Tourlet', a series of short drives, suitable for half-day or afternoon trips. Produced with many centres as their starting point they were claimed to 'add interest to brief excursions in the country'. During the four summer months of 1934 700,000 itineraries were issued. No distinction was made between itineraries that might have been issued to cover business trips, or any form of utilitarian journey, and holiday journeys but this fragmentary information may offer one way of estimating the frequency of motor touring.<sup>[22]</sup> In 1934 the AA claimed a membership of 500,000, which suggests that there were 1.4 requests for an itinerary for every member, in the summer of that year. Of course, it must also be assumed that for every expedition undertaken with the aid of an itinerary dozens more would have been undertaken without such an aid, either because they were familiar to the driver or the destination was well signposted. From the hotelier's perspective this new flexibility gave rise to increasing and cheaper competition and it seemed to *Hotel* 'as if everybody with a spare room is advertising for bed and breakfast or offering teas'.<sup>[23]</sup> It will be seen in Chapter Six that much of this competition came from rural Britain, where farmers and others took advantage of the growing interest in discovering the countryside.

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<sup>[22]</sup> *Automobile Association Handbook 1935-6*, (1935), p. 565-9.

<sup>[23]</sup> *Hotel*, July 1932.

The second problem identified by *Hotel* followed the first. By 1934 the greatest threat to trade was seen as the camping holiday, due to fact that '[t]he motor makes the transport of tents easy and the motor-trailer enables whole families to enjoy their holidays in their moving homes'.<sup>[24]</sup> Three years later the increase in camping holidays was identified as 'prodigious'.

Nowhere was it possible to escape the sight of camping grounds with a good collection of tents and caravans in every case. In one instance, near Southend, it is estimated that during the first week of August no less than 25,000 people were living under canvas.... Unquestionably the increasing popularity of the motor-car has done much to bring this about. People who are owners of cars can easily get about the country with a tent and folding beds packed with the luggage on the back. They can camp wherever they wish for as little as 1/-, and at the most 1/6 per night!<sup>[25]</sup>

A survey carried out by the magazine revealed that campers included '[m]any good class people who previously stayed in hotels'. Some had chosen this new form of holiday 'because they like the open-air life, others...because it saves money'.<sup>[26]</sup> However, the writer did not attempt to estimate the numbers involved in either category. It can be assumed that the majority of these campers were likely to be amongst the less well-off motorists, making a virtue out of a necessity. Motorists such as Mollie Easton and her husband. Both were teachers, working for the London County Council, but she was forced by the marriage bar to give up work after her

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<sup>[24]</sup> *Hotel*, July 1932.

<sup>[25]</sup> *ibid*, September, 1935.

<sup>[26]</sup> *ibid*.



marriage in 1928. Their holidays, along with their two children, involved camping either at her father's farm in Berkshire, or at the seaside.<sup>[27]</sup>

It is possible to provide some figures for the numbers of motorists who were hiring caravans in the 1930s. A cheap model built by Raven, Cheltenham, Carlight or Airlight could be bought from £50-100. However, even these economy models represented a sizeable sum to the average middle-class salary-earner and by 1933 only 3,500 private caravans were in use.<sup>[28]</sup> An alternative was to rent a caravan and firms such as the Nomad Caravan Company, on the newly built Kingston by-pass, charged from five guineas for a week's rental in 1932.<sup>[29]</sup> This method offered far more motorists the chance to engage in caravanning holidays. The *Advertiser's Weekly* reported that 150,000 people hired caravans in 1935.<sup>[30]</sup>

The third area of concern for *Hotel* was again connected with the issue of the car's effect on the middle-class consumer's pocket. In 1934 an article discussing the industry's future described 'the craze to own a car', which had seen thousands of families make 'great sacrifices in order to become the proud possessor of an automobile', as a development 'which undoubtedly has militated against the hotel-keepers' prosperity', as many families had 'foregone their summer holidays, investing

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<sup>[27]</sup> Letter 8, correspondence with Mrs Mollie Easton.

<sup>[28]</sup> W.M. Whiteman, *The History of The Caravan* (1973), p. 92. *Practical Motorist*, 27 July 1935, *The Caravan and Trailer*, May 1933, C.W. Wilman, *Camping by Caravan*, (1929), p. 13. Cited in D.L. North, 'Middle Class Suburban Lifestyles and Culture in England, 1919-1939' (Oxford, D.Phil, 1988).

<sup>[29]</sup> *Autocar*, 27 August 1932.

<sup>[30]</sup> *Advertiser's Weekly* 5 March 1936.

the money thus saved with the motor industry'.<sup>[31]</sup> The evidence from our sample would indicate that this was often the case.

Just as the appearance of large numbers of working- class patrons at seaside resorts would ensure a migration of their middle-class contemporaries, so the arrival of large numbers of touring middle-class motorists on the highway encouraged more of the very wealthiest motorists to make for continental roads. The interwar years saw a significant rise in the numbers heading to Europe, creating a further distinction amongst the motoring classes that again centred on financial resources. Aldous Huxley's report of his own foreign motor touring indicates that just as in earlier centuries the European tour of the 1920s involved the acquisition of cultural capital, with those engaging in this activity gaining 'merit and superiority over the stay-at-homes':

The fact is that very few travellers like travelling. If they go to the trouble and expense of travelling, it is not so much from curiosity, for fun, or because they like to see things beautiful and strange, as out of a kind of snobbery. People travel for the same reason as they collect works of art: because the best people do it. To have been to certain spots on the earth's surface is socially correct; and having been there, one is superior to those who have not. Moreover, travelling gives one something to talk about when one gets home. The subjects of conversation are not so numerous that one can neglect an opportunity of adding to one's store.

To justify this snobbery a series of myths has gradually been elaborated. The places which it is socially smart to have visited are aureoled with glamour, till they are made to appear, for those who have not been there, like so many Babylons or Bagdads. Those who have travelled have a personal interest in cultivating and disseminating these fables.<sup>[32]</sup>

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<sup>[31]</sup>     ibid.

<sup>[32]</sup>     A. Huxley, *Along The Road*, (1925), pp. 3-4.

Continental motoring was obviously the exclusive pursuit of the wealthiest motorists in the early years of motoring, but its popularity had increased markedly by the end of the 1930s, as had the facilities on offer for the Europe-bound motorist. Immediately after the Great War the costs of continental motoring were prohibitive. The greatest deterrent was the deposits that were demanded from motorists before they were granted entrance to their continental destination. France, for example, in the early 1920s demanded a deposit of £700 for a car valued at £1000. This levy had been introduced to prevent British owners selling their cars in France. In 1922 the AA and the RAC announced that they were prepared to act as guarantors of the genuine touring nature of a motoring trip, but the traveller still had to stump up a £100 deposit, together with an approved banker's indemnity for the balance of the duty on the car.<sup>[33]</sup> There are no figures available for the number of motorised tourists leaving the UK before 1924, but with such obstacles in the way it is highly likely that very few of the 550,000 who left Britain to tour Europe in 1921 took a motor car with them.<sup>[34]</sup> However, as Table Two indicates, the numbers of cars being taken on foreign touring trips rose steadily in the years up to 1930. If these figures, calculated in 1933 by F.W. Olgivie as part of a study of tourism, are adopted along with his recommendation that each car be averaged as carrying three passengers, then it would seem that 50-60,000 holiday-makers were motoring abroad in 1930. This figure would mean that approximately every twentieth British tourist

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<sup>[33]</sup> *Autocar*, March 25, 1922.

<sup>[34]</sup> A. Howkins and J. Lowerson, *Trends in Leisure, 1919-1939*, (University of Sussex, 1979).

visiting the continent did so by car.<sup>[35]</sup> With the total number of private cars in use in Britain in that year standing at 1,056,000 it is apparent that at that point only a tiny minority, less than two per cent, of motorists were taking their cars abroad.<sup>[36]</sup>

The records of the motoring organisations indicate that following a blip during the economic crisis of the early 1930s foreign touring continued to increase in popularity as the decade progressed. In 1934 the RAC and AA provided the paperwork for the export of more than 22,000 touring cars across the Channel to Europe,<sup>[37]</sup> by 1938 this figure had risen by 72 percent to 38,000.<sup>[38]</sup> There were a number of explanations for this growth, but the main one was that touring became less expensive, the result of competition between France and Germany to attract tourist currency. Bureaucratic procedures were also lifted as a result of this rivalry.<sup>[39]</sup> Most significantly the requirements for customs deposits on entering France and Germany were abolished.<sup>[40]</sup> Touring was also simplified in 1932, by the introduction of the Autocheque which was a voucher handed in at the continental hotel in lieu of cash.<sup>[41]</sup> The *Autocheque Handbook* of 1936 described how the Autocheque covered dinner, room, continental breakfast, gratuities and garage.

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[35] F.W. Ogilvie, *The Tourist Movement: An Economic Study* (1933).

[36] B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, (Cambridge, 1962)

[37] *Autocar*, January 25, 1935. *ibid.*, June 25, 1937.

[38] C. Buchanan, *Mixed Blessings: The Motor Car in Britain* (1958), p. 76.

[39] R.G. Pinney, *Britain - Destination of Tourists?*, (1944), provides a detailed story of the efforts made by various European nations to attract foreign tourists.

[40] *Autocar*, 12 January 1934, 22 June 1934, 20 July 1934, 28 June 1935, 1 May 1936.

[41] *ibid.* 20 May 1932.

Thousands of hotels were involved in the scheme which encompassed Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Ireland, Portugal, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, Luxembourg and Italy.<sup>[42]</sup>

However, even after the reductions of the mid 1930s the costs of travelling overseas with a car were still appreciable. In the immediate post war years the Southern Railway Company had a monopoly on carrying cars to France as they controlled all the steamers and charges were high. By 1930, the former shipping insurance brokers Townsend Brothers Limited had a specially adapted cargo boat operating on the Dover-Calais route.<sup>[43]</sup> By 1935 fares on the Southern Railways operated *Autocarrier* were from £2 5s 6d to £7 15s 8d depending on the length of car and whether shipment was at the owner's or company's risk. Passengers travelled for 12s 6d. These were single fares only.<sup>[44]</sup> To these costs must be added the £3 charged by the RAC and AA for all necessary documentation and the actual costs of the holiday.

The majority of motorists, who could not afford motoring jaunts to the continent, nonetheless had a mobility that could be exploited in a variety of ways. There were numerous ways in which car ownership allowed them to transfer social space into geographical space, whether through informal family drives into the countryside or through visits to a varied range of commercial outlets, which were themselves arranged in a hierarchical fashion. An example were the out-of-town

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<sup>[42]</sup> Autocheques Limited, *Autocheques Handbook* (1936).

<sup>[43]</sup> *Autocar*, April 18, 1930.

<sup>[44]</sup> *ibid.*, January 25, 1935.

facilities that began catering for motorists, which ranged from the Roadhouses, which sprang up largely in the South East, through to private golf clubs and right up to the grandest country clubs.<sup>[45]</sup> In 1931 the *Autocar* offered its interpretation of the social function of such establishments, focusing on the Roadhouse.

The working classes have their hops in the assembly rooms two or three times a week...but the time will come when more people, classified by their ownership of a car, will find suitable rendezvous of their own. One of the kind I have in mind already exists in The Bell House at Beaconsfield, a comfortable evening's run from Oxford, Maidenhead, Windsor, Staines and London. Here one can have a meal at very reasonable cost, or just a coffee, and there is a ballroom and a swimming-pool. A gay little place for motorists who want to shake themselves out of the rut occasionally in the company of people of their own kind.<sup>[46]</sup>

A similar sense of the car providing membership of a club emerged when interviewees spoke about its role in middle-class courtship. To middle-class parents the sight of a young man come-a-courting their daughter in his car was a welcome one. It was a sign that he was a young gentleman, someone getting on in life. William McKenzie was one interviewee who felt this was the case. He said: 'I think it was more or less a sort of promise that the boy was going to get on, if he could afford a car he was going to get on. Because getting on was terribly important'.<sup>[47]</sup>

Marjorie Clarke had a similar impression, telling of how she and her fiancé had gone off on a motoring holiday in 1937, with her parents' approval. By the same token

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<sup>[45]</sup> I. Brown, *The Heart of England*, (1935), p.78. *The Autocar*, 18 August 1933, listed thirty three Roadhouses, the majority of which were in the South East.

<sup>[46]</sup> *Autocar*, 4 December 1931. Although the Roadhouse phenomenon was comparatively short-lived a variety of different facilities were given the name and the buildings had various architectural styles and offered a varied range of services. See G. Long, *English Inns and Road Houses* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1937), p. 177.

<sup>[47]</sup> *Interview Four*: William McKenzie, b. 1901 London (Interview July 3 1992).

she was allowed to go to office dances that went on until two in the morning, but not 'Saturday night six-penny hops' in St Helens.<sup>[48]</sup> She had met her fiancé through friends at work, two young women from Rainhill, whose social life she was drawn into. She described this as a 'different world' for her. Several of the young people in the 'Rainhill set' had cars, including her future husband. He was a teacher in Liverpool and would alternate driving to work with one or two colleagues who also owned cars, in order to save on running costs. Although his place in the motoring community was precarious, he maintained it for long enough to solidify his relationship with Marjorie, who subsequently viewed the role of the car in her life as a 'great liberator':

The car made all the difference... We may not even have stayed together, or what shall I say, it may not even have got that far without a car because it would have been not impossible but a bit difficult.<sup>[49]</sup>

For them the car was all-important. When the old Austin Seven finally gave up on them, on the way back from a holiday in the West Country in 1937, they were forced to sell it to a nearby garage for the knock-down price of thirty shillings. They did not replace it, saving instead to pay for their wedding. Bicycles replaced the car, for a number of years, as their mode of individual transport, although they did hire cars and holiday with friends in Anglesey in 1938 and Cornwall in 1939.

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<sup>[48]</sup> *Tape 7*, Mrs Marjorie Clarke.

<sup>[49]</sup> *ibid.*, Mrs M.C.

## Conclusion

This example brings together the three threads of the argument that have been put forward here. Firstly, it demonstrates that the car did have utility value in getting a young professional from A to B. It also had utility value in allowing a young middle-class couple to continue a courtship that would otherwise have been difficult. Secondly, it offers a further example of the possible symbolic value of car ownership. In this case the car provided Marjorie's parents with evidence of a young suitor's social standing and credibility. Thirdly, it serves as a further example of the need to examine the consumption of the car in its entirety for the car then, as now, was often central to people's images of each other as well as their dreams about themselves. Car ownership had an emblematic status amongst the middle classes in interwar Britain.

In his autobiography, *Bright Morning*, Don Haworth tells the story of his Burnley childhood, offering a description of the Sunday motoring rituals of his neighbours, the Ryders, whose father was a senior bank clerk.

'Do you go to Blackpool?' My brother asked. 'Better places than Blackpool', Harry [Ryder] said. My brother asked my grandfather where could be better than Blackpool. My grandfather couldn't think. 'We want to get a car', my brother said, 'then we'd find out'.<sup>[50]</sup>

Not very far away, in Southport, a little girl thought she knew the answer:

We used to motor down to Juan Les Pins, through France. Roads were long and empty. We stopped for meals which I adored; long sticks of bread I loved and they smelt of sour dough. The waiters wearing aprons, and the red wine in bottles which I was not allowed

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<sup>[50]</sup> D. Haworth, *Bright Morning: Images of a Lancashire Boyhood* (1990), p. 101.



to drink, so after the meal I stole the black cherries put on the table with fruit and I went up to the bedroom and squeezed them! It looked like red wine.<sup>[51]</sup>

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<sup>[51]</sup> *Letter 4*, Antoinette Heeny, Southport.

## **Chapter Four**

### **‘A Myth that is Not Allowed to Die’. Gender and the Car**

## Introduction

The opening chapters have demonstrated that it was not simply matters of technical efficiency, income, and utility that determined the design, marketing, sales and uses of cars. The values and doctrines of middle-class Britain had a crucial role in shaping this process. Equally importantly, similar factors dictated the relationship to the car of men and women. This survey of the interwar car culture continues by examining the ways in which beliefs about gender and technology influenced motoring and the motor car.

The developments described here had an influence on British society long after 1939. In the interwar years the car arrived as a new technology available for the first time to millions of people. The agency that gender was to play in shaping ideas about car use, in particular, would prevent millions of women from taking to the driving seat. On the other side of the equation an identification of driving skill with masculinity has encouraged many a young male to learn to drive. Even by the mid-1960s only 13 per cent of women held a driving licence, in comparison with 56 per cent of men.<sup>[1]</sup> By the late 1970s the gap was narrowing steadily but continued to be appreciable: 30 per cent of women held licences and 68 per cent of men.<sup>[2]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Ministry of Transport, *National Travel Survey 1964: Part One - Household Vehicle Ownership and Use* (1964).  
Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

<sup>[2]</sup> L. Pickup, 'Hard to Get Around: A Study of Women's Travel Mobility', in J. Little, L. Peake and P. Richardson (eds), *Women in Cities: Gender and The Urban Environment* (1988), p. 98.

Furthermore, government studies revealed that in car-owning families the car was seldom assigned for any significant periods for the use of the woman.<sup>[3]</sup>

Previous histories of the motor car have failed to address this issue. Of course, as Joan Scott has argued, historians are susceptible to the gendered notions that are current within the society in which they work;<sup>[4]</sup> Kenneth Richardson's *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939* being a clear example of this phenomenon. His study is an illustration of how the car has come to be identified very largely with masculinity for, when the narrative does leave the 'masculine' world of the motoring engineers, entrepreneurs and manufacturers to examine some of the uses to which cars were put, it offers two chapters on motor sports and motor cars but only one on the 'arrival of middle-class motoring'. The only indication that women may have had a role in this heroic story of technological development comes at two points. The first dangles from the very end of the two chapters on motor sports and motor cars where the reader is offered, in one paragraph, a list of names which 'deserve to be recorded' of the women who took part in motor races.<sup>[5]</sup> The second is an uncritical narration of a Birmingham urban legend about a woman motorist who could not do a three point turn and had passers-by pick her car up and turn it around so that she could return home.<sup>[6]</sup>

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[3] The Department of The Environment and The Department of Transport, *Housewives' Mobility and Travel Patterns* TRRL, Report LR 971 (Crowthorne, Transport and Road Research Laboratory).

[4] J. Scott, *Gender and The Politics of History* (Chichester, 1988), especially Ch. 2.

[5] K. Richardson, *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939* (1977), p. 168.

[6] *ibid.*, p. 182.

This chapter will offer an assessment of which members of motoring families drove cars. It will emerge that in the majority of car-owning families in the 1920s and 1930s the driving was performed by male rather than female members. To understand why this was the case, it will be necessary to briefly outline the prevalent gender relations of the period to ascertain the particular role the car had in reinscribing notions of femininity and masculinity. Motoring and the motor car came to be largely identified with masculinity, although certain aspects of the car that sat less securely alongside traditional, rugged, masculinity were ascribed to a feminisation of the aesthetics of the car. In fact it is far more likely that aesthetic developments, which were laid at the door of this alleged feminisation, were largely the result of the issues surrounding class, consumption and social status which have already been discussed.

### **Who Drove Cars? Men and Women at the Wheel**

Many historians with an interest in gender have had to face the problems arising from the fact that women are often absent from historical sources. In this case that presents some difficulties in ascertaining the exact roles performed by men and women in the evolving motoring community. For example, it is not possible to authoritatively estimate the numbers of each sex holding driving licences in the period. A Ministry of Transport survey of six representative areas, conducted in 1933, suggested that 12 per cent of all driving licences were held by women but as far as can be ascertained this was the only official effort to estimate the gender of

drivers in the interwar years.<sup>[7]</sup> As has been illustrated car ownership was to a great extent confined to the professional and commercial middle-classes. The SMMT calculated that only those with comfortable salaries were capable of meeting both purchase price and running costs of a new car. In 1938, for instance, their estimated necessary salary was £250.<sup>[8]</sup> This is a significant amount, given Ray Strachey's comment, in her 1937 work *Careers and Openings for Women*, that '£250 a year is quite an achievement, even for a highly qualified woman with years of experience'.<sup>[9]</sup> The 1931 Census reveals that though the number of women employed in the professions was increasing, following the Sex Disqualification Removal Act of 1919, they still formed a small minority in all professions except teaching, as Table One demonstrates. Furthermore, the major finance houses dealing in the hire purchase of motor vehicles, such as the UDT, operated a policy of credit rationing. The UDT favoured customers who were householders, owned their own business and were married with children, feeling that such people had more incentive to honour their agreement.<sup>[10]</sup> Obviously, such terms provided a further potential obstacle for any single woman hoping to buy her own car.

A further impediment to female car ownership would have been the infrequency in which they were employed in the transport and motor industries. It

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<sup>[7]</sup> Ministry of Transport, *Report on Fatal Road Accidents which occurred during the year 1933* (HMSO, 1934), p. 7.

<sup>[8]</sup> S. Bowden, 'Demand and Supply constraints in the Inter-War UK Car Industry: Did the Manufacturers get it Right?', *Business History*, 33 (1991), p. 256.

<sup>[9]</sup> R. Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women* (1937), p. 69.

<sup>[10]</sup> S. Bowden, 'The New Consumerism', in: P. Johnson (ed), *20TH Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change*, (Singapore, 1994), p. 254.

has been seen that those amongst the working classes who had cars often had such connections.

Who, then, were the women drivers estimated to make up twelve per cent of all drivers by the mid 1930s? The Ministry of Transport survey does not offer any evidence as to the number of women driving their own cars rather than co-driving the family car but perhaps one or two tentative suggestions can be made at this point. Several thousand women drivers must have emanated from the well paid female professionals identified in Table One, who had the potential income to buy their own car.

**Table One**  
**Men and Women in the Professions, 1931**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
<b>Judges, Magistrates and Barristers</b>	3,291	80
<b>Solicitors</b>	19,081	133
<b>Physicians and Surgeons</b>	30,057	3,331
<b>Vets</b>	2,456	86
<b>Engineers</b>	38,829	209
<b>Architects</b>	10,154	111
<b>Teachers</b>	99,694	181,886
<b>Dentists</b>	12,434	469

Sources: H. Durant, *The Problem of Leisure* (1938)  
and R. Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women* (1937)

However, such women often faced the problem of the marriage bar and a single life may have been a prerequisite for car ownership. By far the biggest group of professional women were employed as teachers, where a qualified female teacher could expect to earn £254 in an elementary school in 1930, compared to a male

contemporary's £334.<sup>[11]</sup> Such a salary would have put her into the SMMT's bracket of potential motorist only by the end of the 1930s, if she had in the meantime remained single and could convince a finance house of her suitability as a hire purchaser. Another quota of women owner-drivers must have come from the 149,000 female managers, or proprietors of retail businesses, identified by the 1931 census, or from the 2,000 who were running wholesale businesses, or the 2,000 commercial travellers.<sup>[12]</sup> Others may well have been wives in the wealthiest families who found themselves able to maintain more than one car. Conceivably, others drove their ageing parents in a car bought by family finances. It also seems highly probable that others adopted a system of car sharing with working sisters or friends buying cars and sharing the running costs. Frances Widdowson noted just such arrangements in her study of the teaching profession.<sup>[13]</sup>

Evidence gathered for this thesis may be indicative of the methods by which individual women gained access to the driving seat. Table Two provides details of the motoring histories of ten women drivers, in the interwar years, which came to light during the course of research. Of these women 30 per cent had their own financial resources and bought their own car; 30 per cent had a car bought for them by parental finances or had the use of a relative's car; 30 per cent drove the family car; and 20 per cent drove as part of their work.

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[11] D. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty* (1989), p. 81.

[12] R. Strachey, *Careers and Openings*, p. 42.

[13] F. Widdowson, '"Educating Teacher": Women and Elementary Teaching in London, 1900-1914', in L. Davidoff, and B. Westover, *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words* (1986), p. 112.



**Table Two**  
**Women drivers and their access to cars**

<b>Woman Driver</b>	<b>Woman's Occupation</b>	<b>Details of their access to a car.</b>
<b>Eugenie Michaelis</b>	Delivered cars for father's garage	Through work
<b>Elen Speight</b>	Owned Hairdressing Salon	Bought her own: second-hand
<b>Kathleen Tootil</b>	Teacher	Father bought her a car
<b>Mrs Holder</b>	Housewife	She and her husband both drove their car
<b>Alice Craig</b>	Shop Assistant	Father bought her a car
<b>Mrs McKenzie</b>	Housewife	She drove family's second car.
<b>Janet Done</b>	Doctor	Bought her own car
<b>Sheila Anderson</b>	Chauffeur	Through work
<b>Eironwy Llwellyn's Grandmother</b>	Farmer	Bought her own car
<b>Connie Foster</b>	Chauffeured father (unpaid)	Through work. Also used brother's car when he went overseas.

Given this evidence, together with what is known about the earning power of middle-class women in 1920s and 1930s Britain, it is evident that the majority of women drivers did not have the socio-economic power to purchase their own car. Women owner-drivers were, inevitably, a very small minority of motorists. On the basis of the small sample presented here a figure of four per cent would have to be

projected, or six per cent if we were to include women who had their own car bought for them through family finances.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Femininity, Masculinity and the Control of Technology**

It is clear that is necessary to focus to a great degree on what could be called the women co-drivers. Although our sample suggests that up to half of all women licence holders were given the opportunity to drive through the agreement of husbands and fathers, the low proportion of female licence holders makes it clear that in the majority of car-owning families it was a man not a woman who took the wheel. The family car was usually purchased through a father or husband's income, women in the family were therefore reliant on the permission of a man before they could occupy the driver's seat. For this reason gender ideology and related notions about technology and its control were important in defining the developing car culture.

At this point it will be useful to relate some of the arguments that have emerged from what has been called the 'new sociology of technology'. A major figure in this movement is Judy Wacjman, who argues that only by acknowledging technology as a social construct can we accurately measure its effects on society, as well as the effects of society on technology.<sup>[15]</sup> Rather like Joan Scott, and others within history, Wacjman maintains that our notions of femininity and masculinity are constantly under contestation and reconstruction. She has attempted to describe the

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<sup>[14]</sup> This calculation is premised on the estimate that 12 per cent of all licence holders were female.

<sup>[15]</sup> J. Wacjman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 9-19.

part technology plays in this process, concluding that women are often reluctant to enter into many areas of technology because the language and symbolism of that technology is masculine. Thus, for women power and control of technology

is not simply a question of acquiring skills because these skills are embedded in a culture of masculinity that is largely coterminous with the culture of technology. In the school and the workplace this culture is incompatible with femininity. To enter this world, to learn its language, women have first to forsake their femininity.<sup>[16]</sup>

Thus, the social and cultural construction of much technology as masculine serves to alienate women from it. Once this is understood it becomes possible to see how technology can be analysed as 'a culture that expresses and consolidates relations among men'.<sup>[17]</sup> Of course, in explaining the normative regulation of one gender by another it is important to consider the extent to which men and women also regulate others of the same gender.

Having noted that the number of female licence holders was only 12 per cent of the total the obvious question to pose is why wasn't the figure much closer to 50 per cent? Why weren't women also driving the family car? For example, in Manchester, in 1938, there were 45,875 cars, motor cycles, goods vehicles and taxis on the city's streets with 50,912 persons licensed to drive them.<sup>[18]</sup> It seems clear from this example that very few private cars were driven by more than one family member, a male. There were two reasons for this. The culture and technology of the car was socially constructed, largely by men, as masculine. Men designed,

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<sup>[16]</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>[17]</sup> ibid., p. 22.

<sup>[18]</sup> *City of Manchester Watch Committee: Statistical Returns* (1939). Vehicles in each category were: cars 28,759; motorcycles 5,998; goods vehicles 9,689; taxis 1,429.

marketed, sold and bought cars to the virtually total exclusion of women. Whenever aspects of the car seemed ill-fitted to notions of masculinity they were ascribed to a growing feminine influence, which was often portrayed as a corrupting one. Increasing emphases on aesthetics and comfort were seen in this light. That the technology, language and symbolism of the car were largely masculine also helps explain any reluctance on the part of women about taking the wheel. We shall see that women's driving skills were constantly deprecated even when it was proved that they were less likely to be involved in motoring accidents than their male contemporaries.

### Gender in Interwar Britain

This period was one of much discussion about femininity and masculinity. The car had a role to play in this, confirming pre-existing attitudes as well as being involved in the construction of evolving conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The shifting of gender roles during the First World War had seen women performing tasks previously defined as masculine and beyond their capabilities. One of these areas was motor driving where women were heavily involved behind the lines in France and on home soil.<sup>[19]</sup> The work of these women received essentially positive coverage both

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<sup>[19]</sup> The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (F.A.N.Y.) helped the Territorial Army raise 10 companies of 150 drivers for the army. The 5,000 strong Women's Legion Motor Transport Section did a similar job for the R.A.F. D. Mitchell, *Women on The Warpath: The Story of Women in The First World War* (1966), pp. 221-2. M.

during and immediately following the war although, as was the case with women's war work generally, their work as ambulance drivers was described as having allowed men to be released for 'more important work'.<sup>[20]</sup> But by February 1919 letters were appearing from readers of the *Autocar* describing the continued employment of women in the Auxiliary Service Corps (A.S.C.) as a scandal. These jobs should be given to men, it was argued, and in September the army did indeed announce that men would soon replace these women.<sup>[21]</sup>

This backlash against wartime women drivers should be seen as part of the wider debate about gender roles that took place in interwar Britain.<sup>[22]</sup> The immediate postwar years saw a great deal of attention focused on the 'new freedom' of young women. Concerned comment was passed on the fashions for short hair, short dresses and smoking in public. More significantly there seemed to be a growing tendency towards androgyny evidenced by a new boyish womanhood with women in trousers, the new flat chested look for women, and pull-overs that were interchangeable between the sexes. This new woman also had a male counterpart who was effeminate, intellectual, highbrow and concerned with how other men

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Izzard, *A Heroine in Her Lifetime: A Life of Dame Helen Gwynne-Vaughn* (1969), p. 281.

[20] *Autocar*, 21 December 1918.

[21] *Autocar*, 8 February 1919.

[22] For a fuller discussion of this question see A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991); Beddoe, *Back to Home*, B. Melman, *Women and The Popular Imagination in The Twenties*, (1988); M. Joannou, 'Nothing is Impracticable for a Single Middle-Aged Woman with an Income of Her Own': The Spinster in Women's Fiction of the 1920s', in S. Oldfield (ed), *This Working-Day World: Women's Lives and Cultures in Britain 1914-1945* (Basingstoke, 1994); and J. Greenfield, 'Angels in the House' Unpublished MA (Warwick, 1991).

dressed.<sup>[23]</sup> Even if such types did not exist very often in reality their ideological significance was ensured by stories written about them in the press and by their appearance in popular novels such as R. Denne Waterhouse's *Week-End Ticket*, where brother and sister Carol and Julian are very obvious literary representations of the new gender-bending youth.<sup>[24]</sup>

There was also a significant demographic imbalance between the sexes, with 1,886,000 more women than men in the post war population<sup>[25]</sup>, which the popular press came to label the 'surplus' and later the 'superfluous women'.<sup>[26]</sup> A great deal of energy was expended debating the possible impact of this imbalance, with many suggesting that young women should emigrate to find husbands in the white colonies. *The Times*, for example, urged this course of action in August 1921. The young women enfranchised by the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 were heavily scrutinised for any signs of voting behaviour which might significantly alter election results. The inconstancy of the so-called 'flapper vote' was one explanation offered by both Conservative and Labour politicians for their various electoral reverses.<sup>[27]</sup>

Anxieties also surfaced in press attacks on women who remained in supposedly male jobs following the cessation of the war. Previously praised as patriots they were

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<sup>[23]</sup> Melman, *Women and The Popular Imagination*, p. 22.

<sup>[24]</sup> R. Denne Waterhouse, *Week-End Ticket* (Bristol, 1934).

<sup>[25]</sup> This figure is for 1924 and is taken from *Statistical Abstract* 70 (1927), pp. 4-5.

<sup>[26]</sup> Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty* and Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination* are amongst historians who have discussed this issue.

<sup>[27]</sup> A. Thorpe, 'Labour and The General Election of 1931', unpublished conference paper, *Conference on The History of The Labour Party*, Centre for Social History, University of Warwick (1994).

now described as 'vampires who deprived men of their rightful jobs'.<sup>[28]</sup> There were strong currents of thought seeking to reassert familiar patterns of feminine and masculine behaviour. According to Grave and Hodge's *The Long Weekend* 'the air of competence which young women had assumed from doing a "man's job" during the war was widely resented by advocates of "femininity", which included sweet inconsequence, childishness, and submissiveness'.<sup>[29]</sup> A new domestic ideology emerged which emphasised the traditional gender roles in the light of the socio-economic conditions of the time. Woman's place was very definitely in the home but her role was now to be one of professional housewife, trained and educated to run the household along the lines of domestic scientific management. According to this essentialist argument women were biologically suited for this role. Parallel to this was the notion that the world outside the home was still very much a masculine one.<sup>[30]</sup>

### **Femininity, Masculinity and the Car**

Given the prevailing notions about gender, it is not surprising to find that, as ownership grew, the car became the site of much debate over gender. Here was a new technology which before the war had been a male domain. Now it had the potential to become a very powerful symbol of feminine equality, presenting as it did

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<sup>[28]</sup> R. Graves, and A. Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (New York, 1963), p. 44.

<sup>[29]</sup> Graves and Hodge, *Long Weekend*, p. 44.

<sup>[30]</sup> Greenfield, 'Angels in The House', p. 24.

the opportunity of equal mobility, speed and independence to all who had access to the driving wheel. Many men clearly felt a challenge to their dominant position at the wheel and in society more generally and a plethora of letters, articles and comments in the motoring journals continually sought to portray the car and motoring as a masculine pursuit. Of course, many women inevitably shared traditional notions about femininity, masculinity and technology. One result of this was a tendency to identify aspects of the car and motoring along gendered lines. This position was never more explicitly stated than by Mrs Victor Bruce, in an article written in 1929 for *Morris Owner*, entitled 'Women's Work In The Garage'.

Where Phyllis is unable to drive - and it is much to the public good that she should not be urged to learn against her will - there is no reason why she should feel excluded from some part of the joy of ownership; the part that returns, in time and labour, service for willing service....in regard to the motor house, I do think it may be regarded as the woman's part to see that it is spick and span. Think how irritating it is, after a hard day at business and a long drive home in the traffic stream, to have to clear away the litter of the morning's operations before it is possible to put the car away for the night; and what a relief, after dreading the task, to find the garage spotless and a model of orderliness!

Such matters as the making of loose covers for the seats clearly fall to the woman's share....If there is a man about....I do not consider it a woman's task to attend to the rough washing of the car but women should supervise as they have a natural aptitude.<sup>[31]</sup>

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<sup>[31]</sup> *Morris Owner*, June 1929.



So, although 'Phyllis' may simply have been not cut out to drive she did have instinctive talents which could make a second home of the car. Even those who did believe women could drive as well as men were imbued with this type of thinking. In a book for women drivers John Prioleau described, in a patronising tone, how the average woman had a lighter touch and a quicker understanding than man and although he believed that extremely few women had any mechanical sense at all...

She will avoid doing things which will entail a strain on the mechanism, not because she knows that such a strain will be entailed, but because, knowing nothing about it at all, her instinct tells her that it is so.<sup>[32]</sup>

Prioleau had been the first Sales Manager employed at Morris Motors and he therefore had an interest in promoting women's driving, but it is clear he did so by the subtle use of conventional stereotypes.<sup>[33]</sup>

Others, though, were eager to establish the incompatibility of supposedly feminine traits and driving. They employed conventional images of women as delicate creatures who were somehow less rational than men and not always capable of handling some of the situations that arose in the more masculine world outside the home. Here is an example, from the motoring writer Chandos Bidwell.

The tradition of womanhood is against their being competent drivers. In the past they have been brought up to fear rather than to face, to have things done for them rather than to do them for themselves. All that is changing, but tradition tells to a certain extent and, when the car, running at forty miles an hour, is within ten yards of a precipice, the woman driver is apt to say, "John what shall I do?"

The word *concentration* is the great difference between a man and a woman learning to drive. He only has to be told things once. She

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<sup>[32]</sup> J. Prioleau, *Motoring For Women* (1925), p. 10.

<sup>[33]</sup> R.J. Overy, *William Morris* (1976), p. 32.

will ask lots of unnecessary questions and then become interested in the horn or the colour of somebody else's car.

He went on to say that men had the right psychological make-up to make a good driver: 35 per cent judgement, 25 per cent nerve, 20 per cent consideration, 20 per cent presence of mind. He concluded by informing his readers that women he had taught to drive were particularly nervous when changing gear, which is hardly surprising, given his attitude.<sup>[34]</sup>

This pseudo-biological argument was elucidated even more explicitly by a correspondent in the *Autocar* during 1936:

I maintain that women as a class, omitting a few notable exceptions, are not and never will be as proficient drivers ..as men because:-

1. All down the ages man has striven to protect and provide for his womenfolk, and the instinct to receive and to be served is so deeply ingrained into woman that a mere twenty years of motoring experience has by no means eradicated this trait; thus we find that a woman is naturally and fundamentally inconsiderate and selfish on the road.
2. The mind of the woman motorist is governed largely by instinct and environment, whereas that of man is subservient to reason. Thus if a woman wishes to stop suddenly or change her course she does so at once with no thought for any unfortunate who may be behind her.
3. Woman has not man's power to concentrate as she is continually being mentally sidetracked by such burning questions, prompted by an inflated vanity, as "How do I look?"
4. Woman generally is a weaker vessel than man and is physically unfit to have control over such a dangerous instrument as a car if the maximum degree of safety for one and all is to be a feature of a good driver.<sup>[35]</sup>

Another correspondent, writing in 1927, explained how he loathed reporting other motorists to the police, but he made an exception where women were concerned:

I hate reporting another motorist to the police, but I would have no compunction in reporting a woman driver, for the simple reason that

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<sup>[34]</sup> *Morris Owner*, February 1927.

<sup>[35]</sup> *Autocar*, 21 August 1936.

I class them among the dangers of the road. I will not allow any of my friends of the fair sex to drive my car, because I respect and value it. Women are splendid in other ways but in car driving they are laughable.<sup>[36]</sup>

These examples are taken from the motoring journals and represent the views of some of their contributors and correspondents. It is clear these opinions were founded in established notions of femininity, masculinity and the control of technology. The annual motor show editions of the leading journal, the *Autocar*, produced for a wider audience the amusing stories circulated during the show. Many of these stories also reiterated traditional concepts of gender in the context of the car. For example, again in 1927, Mrs Victor Bruce, well known for motoring exploits which included a round-the-world trip, repeated the tale she had heard, and evidently believed, about the woman who had sent a jumper to the Rover company requesting a car in matching colours.<sup>[37]</sup> The same pattern of jokes and folklore has been identified for America by Michael Berger.<sup>[38]</sup> He maintains that the perceived threat to the social order posed by large numbers of mobile female motorists touched a raw nerve in the male psyche, setting off a reaction that was given expression through jokes and stories belittling women drivers. Many such stories have been etched in motoring folklore reappearing in motoring literature or in oral interviews with motorists. For example, Tony Bird who has been motoring since the 1930s explained why the notion of the 'woman driver' had emerged. He believes the first

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<sup>[36]</sup> *Autocar*, 4 November 1927.

<sup>[37]</sup> *ibid.*, 21 October 1927.

<sup>[38]</sup> M.L. Berger, 'Women Drivers!: The Emergence of Folklore and Stereotypic Opinions Concerning Feminine Automotive Behaviour', *Women's Studies International Forum* 9, (1986), pp. 257-263.

women motorists were accustomed to gentleman opening doors for them and they consequently expected right-of-way on the roads as well, with disastrous results.<sup>[39]</sup> In conveying this opinion he was replicating an explanation which had appeared in an article from the *Morris Owner* almost sixty years earlier.

(Women have been used to) a homage amounting to - shall we say - a "right of way". Man has stood aside for her to pass, held open doors for her, given up his seat to her in buses and trams. She has learnt to accept this deference as her right - and she sometimes trades on it. She quite unconsciously expects this same deference to be shown her on the road.<sup>[40]</sup>

Clay McShane has recently discovered similar explanations were offered in the early American car culture.<sup>[41]</sup> Needless to say there is no evidence to support this assessment. Another interviewee, John Flitcroft, described how in the 1920s he had watched a woman drive her car up a hill in a zig-zag fashion because that is what she had formerly done with her horse and carriage.<sup>[42]</sup> As was shown in the introduction to this chapter historians, by their lack of consideration of gender, have also played a part in the transmission of this folklore.

Berger also argues that the potential mobility and freedom that car ownership offered to women symbolised their increasing emancipation and put women on a level physical playing field with men. He claims that bubbling just below the surface of

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[39] *Interviewee Three*: Tony Bird, b. London 1913 (Interviewed February 15 1992).

[40] *Morris Owner*, January 1934.

[41] C. McShane, *Along the Asphalt Path*, p. 158.

[42] *Interviewee Two*: John Flitcroft, b. 1919, Christchurch near Bournemouth (Interviewed February 11 1992).

all the discussion about women drivers lay fears about women's sexuality.<sup>[43]</sup> Many British reports in the 1930s noted the increased sexual activity of the young and remarked that this 'moral decline' was greatest among the middle classes and that it was directly related to car ownership.<sup>[44]</sup>

Of course gendered attitudes towards the car were not simply shaped by prevalent ideas about the control of technology. As in other areas of gender relations legal and scientific arguments were offered, explaining why men rather than women might be expected to take the driving wheel. As Judy Wacjman has demonstrated these arguments also owed a great deal to traditional gendered notions.<sup>[45]</sup> For example, reminders appeared in motoring magazines of women's subordinate legal position. A 1932 article in the *Garage And Motor Agent* advised garage proprietors to confirm with husbands, fathers or employers of women, sons, daughters or chauffeurs, when they ordered goods or work. This was due to what they described as the legal problems that could arise should the car's owner later dispute the bill.<sup>[46]</sup> Another article which appeared in the *Autocar*, in 1929, warned male readers that they were responsible for their wife's torts, that is, an act which gives rise to an action for damages apart from damages for breach of contract. A married man was liable in addition to his wife if she was sued for damages as a result of an incident when driving the family car or any other vehicle. In practice, whichever

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[43] M.L. Berger, 'Women Drivers!': *Women's Studies International Forum* 9 (1986), pp. 257-263.

[44] S. Humphries, *A Secret World of Sex* (1988), p. 104.

[45] Wacjman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*, pp. 1-25 on science.

[46] *Garage And Motor Agent*, 15 April 1922.

marital partner possessed the greater capital would be sued. A father was similarly responsible for a daughter or son's torts if it was adjudged that they were acting as a servant under his instruction.<sup>[47]</sup> In this case male reluctance to see women at the wheel can in part be explained by gender ideology institutionalised in law by an earlier generation. However, for men to see this as an excuse to keep their wife or daughter from driving would indicate a propensity to accept that their female relatives were more likely to come to grief in the family car than they themselves.

Scientific sources could also cast doubt on the wisdom of allowing women to take their place at the driving wheel. In 1938 a columnist in the *Autocar* quoted at length from an article in *The Psychologist* which had convinced him that 'sex *does* bear a part in driving ability'. The piece dealt with three types of neurotic women drivers and is worth quoting at some length because its language demonstrates how its scientific conclusions were reached within the discourse of gender ideology. In turn, these scientific assertions bolstered many readers' preconceived notions of gender.

The aggressive woman drivers comprise the first type. They are afraid that this is a man's world and all women are discriminated against by men. The open road and a powerful car under their hands give them an apparent opportunity to prove that they are as good as any man.

In their effort to prove this, these aggressive women take a fiendish delight in weaving in and out of traffic, frightening poor male drivers by their recklessness and verve. Many a woman takes out her hate of her husband, or her sexual dissatisfaction, in reckless driving.

Driving is, in a certain sense, a tremendously valuable emotional safety-valve. Many a woman who would like to use the axe on her husband or her boss, takes out her homicidal instincts on her car. The cost is only a few gallons of petrol, and is far preferable to a term in prison.

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<sup>[47]</sup> *Autocar*, 12 April 1929.

From this point of view, fast driving probably keeps a great many women out of asylums, but it would be better if we had special race-tracks where both men and women who wanted to blow off emotional steam could do so without endangering the lives of other motorists.

The second type of women neurotics comprises the ladies who are so imbued with a sense of their own worthlessness that they become completely helpless in any traffic situation which requires independence of judgement or action, self-reliance or ingenuity. These are the women who tangle traffic by their ineptitude, their over-cautiousness, their indecision. It is pretty safe to say that a woman who cannot plan a meal, design a dress, or decide where her children shall go to school will not make a good driver.

The third type of woman neurotic does not drive from the wheel, but from the back seat. This is the throne from where many a woman revenges herself for the slights of the kitchen. As in every neurosis, back-seat driving gives them a maximum of subjective power and a minimum of objective responsibility. Nagging, super-critical, worrisome and hysterical women often gain a tremendous sense of power by nullifying the objective superiority of their husbands by the use of caustic comments from the back seat.<sup>[48]</sup>

Thus, the idea of the car as a masculine domain gathered credence from every conceivable angle and women's driving abilities were continually questioned. In 1937 a letter to the *Autocar* about driving tests remarked that:

The important thing is whether the novice can drive safely and has road sense, and it seems unfair to fail him if he is unable to cope with the pointless and illogical questions asked by some women examiners.<sup>[49]</sup>

In June 1937 the issue was even raised in the House of Commons. The Minister of Transport, Burgin, was asked if it was possible for men to have male examiners.<sup>[50]</sup> The Minister replied that it would not be possible to arrange such sexual segregation

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[48] Cited in *Autocar*, 29 July 1938.

[49] *ibid.*, 12 March 1937.

[50] *ibid.*, 11 June 1937.

at test centres. However, the fact that the Ministry ensured that 12 per cent of the driving instructors who took up their posts in 1935 were women, suggests that there may have been some intention to allocate examiners to candidates on a gendered basis.

In other areas involving the use of new technology women also faced the irrationalities of a masculinity on the defensive. The flying career of Mrs Elliot-Lynn was interrupted by the stipulation that all commercial pilots be male. Finally, in 1926, she had the ban lifted after having to suffer the indignity of proving that she could function as a pilot at all times of the month.<sup>[51]</sup> Mrs Elliot-Lynne was one woman who fought against essentialist views of gender. In the sphere of motoring a battle raged too. In the *Autocar*, in 1921, Viola Meeking wrote of the women who had discovered the pleasures of motoring during the war. She described how they had formerly been at a disadvantage through a childhood socialisation which made them ignorant of technology, where as girls 'the use of even the simplest tools has surely been discouraged'.<sup>[52]</sup> It should be noted that the consistent identification of technology with masculinity ensured the continuation of this process. In 1930 Dorothy Ashwell, responding to an attack on women drivers, argued that drivers should be divided into good and bad with various degrees in between instead of the customary point of reference whereby '[m]en drivers are usually referred to as drivers, and women drivers always have the sex prefix attached'.<sup>[53]</sup> Also in 1930,

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[51] M. Cardogan, *Women With Wings: Female Flyers in Fact and Fiction* (1992), p. 72.

[52] *Autocar*, 16 April 1921.

[53] *Morris Owner*, February 1930.



E. Spencer Cooper contended that some men still viewed being driven by a woman as 'a confession of weakness':

Do you sir, consider that your wife is a congenital idiot? Presumably not!...The truth is that much of this insistence on the poorness of women's driving is rooted in jealousy. Put plainly, that is what it amounts too. It is the fighting of a rearguard action against the invasion of man's province....It was true, once, that women, as a whole drove badly. Now that is a myth that is not allowed to die.<sup>[54]</sup>

Judy Wacjman has commented on the flexible nature of ideologies of masculinity and their relationship with technology: the evidence of this study supports her case.<sup>[55]</sup> In interwar Britain, despite evidence and argument to the contrary, the myth of greater masculine ability at the wheel was not allowed to die. It was simply redefined whenever previous configurations grew inappropriate. For example, in 1933 a Ministry of Transport survey revealed that male driving licence holders were involved in 12.5 times more accidents than women licensees. The figure should have been approximately 7.3, if the estimated 12 per cent of women drivers were involved in accidents at the same rate as their male contemporaries.<sup>[56]</sup> But many commentators on these figures refused to see them as an acknowledgement of female capabilities at the wheel. The road safety campaigner Lord Cecil of Chelwood gave a rather remarkable definition of driving skill when he stated that he doubted very much whether women were more skilful than men, even though

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<sup>[54]</sup> *Morris Owner*, November 1930.

<sup>[55]</sup> Wacjman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*, pp. 137-161.

<sup>[56]</sup> *House of Lords, Select Committee on Road Traffic (Compensation for Accidents) Bill and Road Traffic (Emergency Treatment) Bill: Report and Evidence*, (1933)  
This figure was based on a survey of six representative areas which suggested that women held twelve per cent of driving licences. See footnote 4.

women drivers are safer proportionately than men drivers. There is a universal concurrence of opinion among my male motoring friends that women drive much worse than men. I do not know whether that is true or not, but they drive much more slowly, really, and that, is the reason why they are safer.<sup>[57]</sup>

If women motorists were very symbolic of shifting gender relations then the women who took part in motor sport struck right at the heart of attempts to identify motoring with masculinity. A brief examination of the role of men and women in motor sport will illustrate how the gender ideology outlined thus far impinged on real experiences at the wheel. Women's involvement in motor sport was well detailed, it being deemed newsworthy by the press. Of course one advantage for the historian is that in a motor race there are winners and losers. Results were logically recorded, leaving evidence of the driving ability of all the drivers whether male or female. However, things were not always this obvious in the eyes of race organisers, as press reports indicate.

Women drivers faced problems from the administrators at the premier British race track, Brooklands, not being allowed to compete in ordinary meetings there until 1931.<sup>[58]</sup> Even then their success or failure on the track depended not only on their skill at the wheel but also on the whims of the male committee. In 1931 the Brooklands' authorities banned Elsie Wisdom's 130 m.p.h. car because 'no woman could drive it'.<sup>[59]</sup> The following year Wisdom and her partner Joan Richmond became the first female winners of the British 1000 mile race, beating 60 men. Their winning margin was 5 miles and their victory was the first-ever international class

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<sup>[57]</sup> *House of Lords Debates* Fifth Series, 99 (1936) cols. 447-82.

<sup>[58]</sup> *News Chronicle*, 9 October 1931.

<sup>[59]</sup> *Daily Herald*, 17 October 1931.

win for women on the track.<sup>[60]</sup> However, the following year the organising body for the event, the Junior Car Club, considered banning women from the competition because it was, in their opinion, too dangerous.<sup>[61]</sup> Only in 1936 was equality allowed in all meetings by the British Automobile Racing Club, who were responsible for Brooklands.

Elsie Wisdom took the opportunity her high profile offered to castigate the racing establishment, who in her words had ‘earned the unenviable distinction of being an anti-feminine organisation’.<sup>[62]</sup> This provoked a response from readers of the *Autocar*, one of whom offered this advice: ‘to put it bluntly they (women) are not wanted in what are purely masculine events’. He believed that ‘famous lady motorists’ had achieved their status through ‘the persistence of their press agents’ rather than by actual performance. However, he was unable to articulate what he felt were ‘the other purely masculine reasons why women are not wanted in what are regarded as exclusively male events’.<sup>[63]</sup> The practices surrounding rugged, potentially dangerous, uses of the car were patently conceived of as belonging entirely to the particular form of masculinity that this reader felt drawn to and he certainly felt a need to deny women and femininity any part in what appears to have been a process of male bonding. It is also likely that attempts to exclude women from motor racing represented the attempt to defend a bastion of manliness: a space where a rugged

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<sup>[60]</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 6 June 1932.

<sup>[61]</sup> *Daily Herald*, 12 December 1932.

<sup>[62]</sup> *Autocar*, 20 January 1933.

<sup>[63]</sup> *ibid.*, 3 February 1933.

brand of masculinity could be celebrated without the involvement of women, who could of course undermine that celebration by their potential success.

All of this is very suggestive of the gender ideology that must have also had an existence in the family sphere where so few women felt able, or willing, to take their place at the wheel of the family car. Oral evidence sheds light on the thinking within individual families concerning the issue of gender and the car. One female interviewee reported being barred from driving by her husband, a school teacher, whilst her son was encouraged to drive as soon as he came of age:

Q. Did you ever learn to drive?

A. No. And I have to say I was not allowed to. My husband said to me "You're a dreamer. You watch the scenery." He said. "You'd have your eyes off the road." He said "No." And yet our Michael, who was ham-fisted if anybody ever was - driving lessons at 17 - you know that sort of thing. I was a bit resentful really, er but he said "I'll take you wherever you like, you want to go", he was very good. And he said you can be the navigator. And I enjoyed being a navigator.....the only thing was, you see, when he didn't have such very good health I would have been a help then, if I'd driven. And as somebody said "What's the use of a car in the garage, your husband in hospital and you messing about on buses?" And I've been messing about on buses ever since really.<sup>[64]</sup>

Another respondent, John Flitcroft, the son of a motor dealer, was aware of the critique of his own gender ideology but still held fast to his feelings about the character of men and women which had been shaped in his youth in the 1920s and 1930s:

Our reaction to females on the road was quite - I suppose nowadays you'd call it - my daughter says I'm a male chauvinist pig and she may be right. But women on the road were very suspect, very suspect indeed. You know the old German business of church, bedroom and kitchen...er Children, church kitchen? Women were alright in their

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<sup>[64]</sup> *Interview Seven: Marjorie Clarke, b. Warrington, 1915 (Interviewed 10 August 1992).*

place - they'd got their job to do and this was it. They were complementary to men. They weren't sort of imitation men... they had their part of the world, men had theirs. I mean men were the types who went out doing the fighting and most of the flying and things like that and went down coal mines and did all the nasty sorts of jobs. Women did all their domestic stuff, plus things like fashion designing, except for some rather suspect men in that line. And there were one or two things where they could merge a little bit - they worked in the bank...

When asked if his mother had ever learnt to drive he replied: 'I don't think it ever occurred to my father that she should learn to drive - no way - it never occurred to him! Women don't drive'.<sup>[65]</sup>

Clearly, both in the realms of public debate and within the family, control of the car was often seen as best left to a male who was deemed qualified to control this powerful, liberating and potentially dangerous new technology through possession of the traditional masculine traits. Cars were defined as a masculine technology and they were operated in a space outside of the feminine sphere of the home. However, increasing use of cars by women clearly threatened the masculine identity of many men who fought to identify the car and motoring with traditional notions of masculinity. If women's success in motor sport threatened notions of masculinity for some men, there was another area where developments threatened masculine identity more generally: the aesthetics of the car. Here, a restructuring of notions of feminine and masculine interest in various aspects of the car took place. It is this facet of the relationship between gender and the car that will now be addressed.

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<sup>[65]</sup> *Interview Two*: John Flitcroft, b. 1919, Christchurch near Bournemouth (Interviewed February 11 1992).

## Manufacturers, Dealers and Gender

Commercial interests cannot always be supposed to coincide with the interests of men. Certainly the attitudes of car manufacturers and dealers were somewhat more complex than those held by some of the ordinary motorists featured above. With the motor industry set on a course of seeking to extend its middle-class market, in part by stimulating replacement demand, it began to examine the possibility of attracting the woman consumer. However, their business strategies and concerns were far from free of the influence of traditional images of gender. For example, the female consumer was often targeted because it was widely felt that wives and daughters of salaried men had the crucial say in the purchase of a car.

Motor manufacturers and dealers, without the aid of modern marketing techniques, based campaigns aimed at women on a mixture of business instinct and traditional notions.<sup>[66]</sup> Thus the preconceptions and insecurities of male middle-class culture were reinscribed in the marketing of the car, with different aspects of the car being associated with femininity or masculinity. It was commonly felt that men used cars for utilitarian and business reasons and they were therefore presumed to be attracted by cost, economy, ruggedness and reliability. Less 'masculine' facets of the car were often associated with a growing feminine interest in leisure uses of

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<sup>[66]</sup> *Advertiser's Weekly* during the interwar years bears witness to the confusion about addressing the female consumer. Several articles appeared on the subject of the woman's point of view - which assumed that there was one monolithic feminine viewpoint. One survey of advertisers' approach to attracting women revealed that 'it is not safe to trade on women's sense of humour.' - *Advertiser's Weekly*, 13 March 1931.

the car and women were adjudged to be attracted largely by styling, colour, and comfort.

In 1919 the Scottish motor manufacturers Arrol-Johnston sought agents for their car in the *Motor Trader* by explicitly citing their reasons for advertising in women's magazines:

The "Lady of the house" usually has a good deal to say in the choice of a car. And, having the gift of extempore eloquence and the time to think up reasons why, she often wheedles or bullies her poor old husband into buying the car SHE wants. Everybody knows that. The firm of Arrol-Johnston Ltd., recognises the power of woman in this matter. They advertise the A.J. in several ladies' journals (between blushful frilly announcements and pictures of pearl pendants) and they never let up on telling the ornamental sex why they ought to have a tame vehicle from Dumfries concealed about the buildings.<sup>[67]</sup>

Such thinking led to virtually every advance in automotive design and comfort being attributed to feminine concerns, conceits and vanity, with women being adjudged to possess a far greater influence on the development of the car than their socio-economic position in society would seem to have merited. In a 1926 issue of *Good Housekeeping* Massac Buist<sup>[68]</sup> pondered the extent of feminine influence on car design, concluding that 'every practical body development from the goggle age of motoring until to-day has been more to meet the needs of women than of men'. A long list of these developments included the provision of 'a spare wheel with a tyre', 'the electric engine starter' and 'the standardisation of lacquer bodies to the great saving of labour and reduction of reconditioning charges'.<sup>[69]</sup> All such devices were

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<sup>[67]</sup> *Motor Trader*, 5 May 1920.

<sup>[68]</sup> Buist was at that point motoring correspondent on the *Morning Post* and later became editor of *The Autocar*.

<sup>[69]</sup> *Good Housekeeping* September 1926.

of greater significance to men because they were by far the majority of owner-drivers. It was men who changed the tyres, started the engine, cleaned the car and paid the reconditioning charges but this factor was obscured in the mists of the ideology of masculinity. Of course, 'real men' rather missed the opportunity to risk breaking a limb crank-starting a car. The mists of gender ideology also descended over attempts to measure the economic impact an increasing number of women drivers could have upon the motor industry. Between 1919 and 1939 the *Motor Trader* paid serious attention to the subject of women buyers on only four occasions. Pointedly, their failure to place a spotlight on women more frequently casts serious doubt on the theory of an all-pervading feminine influence. In their analyses business considerations were marred by an inability to understand the female consumer. On the first two occasions they focused on women, business considerations were clouded by a fear of the damage that a perceived feminine faddishness could wreak on the car. The first example is from 1925.

Not only will new cars come into use, but vehicles formerly used by man at week-ends will be employed almost every day by his wife or daughter. In a great many respects the influence of women will be all to the good, as they hasten forward the development of the car, increase its comfort, its reliability, and its simplicity. In particular they will give a strong impetus to the small car, which by its ease of control, light handling, and general convenience is more suitable for them than big and heavy cars...But chassis designers must not pander to the new influence by spoiling good engineering by some fashionable fad. Freakish designs in bodywork must not be encouraged, for whilst they may appeal to a few notoriety seeking women, the great mass of women motorists will have better taste.<sup>[70]</sup>

Two years later, in 1927, they returned to the subject with an editorial noting that in the American market 'mere man is beginning to take rather a back

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<sup>[70]</sup> *Motor Trader* 26 September 1925.



seat...especially when it comes to buying. The woman buys: the man pays'. They believed that Britain had not yet reached 'that stage of feminine dictatorship in automobile matters, but there is no mistaking the direction in which things are tending'. In the same issue another article was the first to attempt to tackle the issue of women and the car in any detail. It advised the trade to

take into account the psychological fact that women are very imitative. Thus every woman driver seen on the road by another woman is as provocative of imitation as is the leader of a new fashion in hats or frocks. The fashion for driving cars has now set in amongst women..for all we know it may be a long-lived or a short-lived fashion. But for the present there is a big harvest for the trade to be reaped.<sup>[71]</sup>

The message of this extract is clear: for women motoring was not serious, it was a fad which could be short-lived and by extension women themselves are not to be taken seriously as motorists or consumers of cars. Women's motoring was superfluous, associated with display and leisure, rather than business and utility. Traders were advised to study fashion shops in order to understand women's mentality. Their description of the allegedly easy-come easy-go consumption habits of women could quite easily be applied to the author's predominantly masculine world of motoring where annual model changes meant that the previous year's models suffered big depreciations in price as increased value was placed on new models with different styling or the latest accessories. The drop in sales that occurred before each annual motor show led to much soul-searching amongst the industry as to whether or not the show was detrimental to regular sales. Miles Thomas, in 1929 the sales manager at Morris Motors, argued in favour of the continued value of the show:

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<sup>[71]</sup> *Motor Trader* 10 August 1927.

The fashion element...is of extreme importance in the private car field, and with so many women buyers and enthusiasts as there are today the "up-to-datedness" of a car is extremely important. Few of the cars that are sold second hand are worn out, or anything like it. One buys a new car normally for very much the same reason that a woman buys a new frock - not because the old one is worn out, but because she does not like to be behind the times.<sup>[72]</sup>

It can be seen that elements of the buying and operation of a motor car that did not correspond to the dominant notions of masculinity were attributed to a feminine influence which was largely outside of male control. This applied equally to the way a car looked and to the fetish of an annual model change. But it was men who designed cars and men who formed the great majority of buyers. The introduction of electric starters and synchromesh gears were for that reason far more significant for men than for women and yet both were to be seen as evidence of an increasing feminine influence. In 1937 another trade magazine, the *Garage and Motor Agent*, was beginning to question the amount of influence attributed to women. In an editorial on 'The Feminine Voice' it argued that the theory that women were 'the unseen power behind the majority of sales has never yet had any proof that we have been able to find'. In the same issue it remarked upon the boredom displayed by most female visitors to Olympia and concluded that 'the male still overwhelmingly predominates as the party to get at with sales arguments, and we guess that he always will'.<sup>[73]</sup> In some ways notions of femininity enabled car owners and manufacturers to excuse their annual model changes by attributing them to fashion conscious and influential female motorists and motorists' wives. It also served to preserve their

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<sup>[72]</sup> *Autocar* 1 November 1929.

<sup>[73]</sup> *Garage and Motor Agent*, 30 October 1937.

sense of masculinity by allowing them to deny the existence of 'feminine' traits in their own behaviour.

Class also had a very significant role in this process. The purchase of stylish new cars was an expression of social status for both sexes, with men, as the actual buyers in most cases, every bit as involved, if not more so, than women. Lacking any developed market research on what women wanted from a car, manufacturers and dealers fell back upon traditional stereotypes of women. This does not mean that it was bad business sense to sell cars to women on the basis of comfort, looks, style and greater efficiency, but it was a misunderstanding to conclude that these factors were not also a major consideration when men came to buy a car. In often attributing the desire to have the latest and most fashionable car to female members of the family, motoring commentators were ignoring the fact that the car played an important role in the display of status for all the middle-class family, male and female, in the caste-like atmosphere of interwar Britain.<sup>[74]</sup> The impact these factors had on annual model changes, design and aesthetic qualities of cars has already been demonstrated.

It was this facet of the evolving culture surrounding the car that the ideology of traditional, rugged, masculinity found difficult to incorporate. Selling cars in such a market called for a great deal of attention to the glamorising of new models. A review of the trade press, the *Motor Trader* and *Garage and Motor Agent*, reveals that the increasingly glamorous presentation of cars, in dealers' showrooms, rested uneasily within their own very masculine discourse. Both these periodicals frequently

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<sup>[74]</sup> See also the discussion of this subject in R. Samuel, 'Middle Class Between The Wars', *New Socialist* January-June (1983).

discussed the unwillingness of many traders to follow the new vogue for alluring presentation. One article, from 1923, described how window dressing was often avoided by some dealers because of cost, laziness and a fear that rivals would call them 'arty'.<sup>[75]</sup> In the same year Leonard Henslowe, a motoring writer, criticised the 'femininity' of some motor advertising.

Flowery language is not what is wanted in the description of a motor car; what the buying public wants to know are the exact, definite, concrete facts - and nothing more... We have long ago passed the time when the motor car was a luxurious toy that Phyllis must persuade Papa to buy. To-day the car is a necessity, and is bought as such.<sup>[76]</sup>

He was wrong. The car was not simply a means of transport. It increasingly became an enormously expressive artefact. It made statements about status, lifestyle and personality. As has been demonstrated here it also performed a symbolic role in the reinscription of gender roles in interwar Britain.

## Conclusion

One reason that gender has been increasingly employed as a tool in historical study is that many feminist historians are uncomfortable with the tendency for history to portray women as passive and therefore, somehow, as victims within the historical process. Gender ideology can create victims, in this case women such as Marjorie Clarke who, because of her husband's refusal, could not take up her position behind the wheel. It was later seen that Mr Clarke himself became, in old age and infirmity,

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<sup>[75]</sup> *Motor Trader* 7 December 1923.

<sup>[76]</sup> *ibid.*, 31 October 1923.

a victim of this very same gender ideology as his car sat idle in the garage while his wife was confined to public transport.

It has also been demonstrated that gender had an active role in defining the culture of the motor car at a point in time where the 'masculinity' of this particular piece of technology was an arena of debate. The triumph and hegemony of the 'maleness' of the car is well known, but the agency of gender within this process has been less well documented. It is hoped that this chapter has gone at least some way to rectifying this important omission.

It has done so by acknowledging the important role ideologies of femininity and masculinity play in the introduction and consumption of a new technology. It has been demonstrated that the car was identified as a masculine technology, a process which alienated many women from seeking a place at the driving wheel. Others like Marjorie Clarke sought to take their place in the driver's seat but were denied a place there for reasons clearly founded in gender ideology. This is not a story of brutish men denying women their freedom - although women's autonomy and mobility were limited in these cases. What is being explained is the role of gender ideology in the normative regulation of men and women; a process during which men and women regulated the behaviour of others of the same gender as well as that of the other gender. Thus many women were no doubt very happy to have their husbands fulfil the manly role and chauffeur them around - whilst they were preeminent in organising the family's domestic life - and were equally capable of sharing common prejudices about the 'woman driver'.

Manufacturers and dealers shared this gender ideology, in their case adopting conventional ideas about women as consumers which were not always appropriate.

At times this led to angst-ridden meditation on the negative effects some faddish female consumers might have on the car. On another level, such thinking allowed men to divert attention away from developments in automotive technology that did not fit well with dominant ideas of masculinity. In the process, women became associated with an almost frivolous side of the car, being most frequently held responsible for developments in comfort or aesthetics. Men, on the other hand, were viewed as serious motorists, understanding how a car worked they appreciated the intricacies of improvements in engineering.

Each of these developments has had long-term consequences. Women are still less likely to drive than men, even in motoring families. In one-car families where women do drive they usually have second-call upon the car and are still often reliant upon public transport. They are still deemed to be poorer drivers than men, when statistics have always shown that they are involved in fewer accidents. For men, the legacies of the interwar period are just as significant. For the majority of young men, the car plays a central role in the expression of their masculinity. Whilst this can have many enjoyable aspects, the less attractive side involves the significant risk they place themselves and other road users in by driving at excessive speed.

## **Chapter Five**

### **‘These Things Will Right Themselves’. Discourses of Road Safety**

## Introduction

In the previous chapters it has been argued that social, cultural and economic determinants affected the design, marketing and uses of cars. In return, the car came to have a significant role in the ideologies of class and gender. This theme will continue in this chapter with two related but distinct points being made. Firstly, it will be maintained that a technology, such as the car, is not only socially constructed, it is also society shaping. There are always technological alternatives, any specific machine is invariably the result of cultural, economic, social and political considerations as well as technological ones. In this case an obvious alternative would have been for British governments to invest in a fully integrated public transport system at the expense of private motoring. Secondly, it will be argued that the infrastructure surrounding a given technology has the same dialectical relationship with social, cultural, political and economic considerations as well as technological ones. The evolution of legislation designed to cope with the less attractive aspects of motoring requires analysis from this perspective. Early moves that initiated the accommodation of Britain's cities to the car and other motor vehicles will also be assessed.

Anyone driving along the parkways of Long Island, New York, might notice the unusually low clearance height of their underpasses, in many cases only nine feet. Between the 1920s and the 1930s Robert Moses, the master builder of roads, parks and bridges for New York, deliberately designed these underpasses to prevent buses accessing many parkways. This enabled affluent, automobile-owning whites to use these parkways for commuting and leisure, whilst limiting access to the less affluent.



As a result of this class and racial bias, ethnic minorities and the less affluent were largely unable to use the acclaimed Jones Beach State Park. Moses further ensured exclusivity by blocking the construction of a rail link to the beach.<sup>[1]</sup>

This is one example of what Langdon Winner has called 'technical arrangements as forms of order'.<sup>[2]</sup> American historians of the automobile have unearthed further examples of this transfer of social relations into geographical space.<sup>[3]</sup> British historians have been less productive in this respect, and the few studies of the social history of the car that exist have tended to envisage its development as teleologically driven. According to this interpretation, cheaper cars always means greater ownership, more roads and greater accommodation of towns and cities to the car. This chapter will suggest that whilst it might be difficult to envisage a different set of developments, it is possible to understand that behind an apparently teleological process lay a great deal of contestation. Society's choices between possible technological developments are highly reflective of patterns of political, social, and economic power. As middle-class car ownership grew, so powerful sections of opinion swung against significant restrictions on the car.

The chapter will begin by examining existing interpretations of the development of motoring legislation and road safety. These interpretations have largely been written from a perspective that views the process as one of trial and

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<sup>[1]</sup> L. Winner, 'Do Artifacts have Politics?', *Daedalus*, 109 (1980), pp. 121-136. Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

<sup>[2]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>[3]</sup> For example, H.L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta*, (Athens, Georgia, 1979) reveals the impact of growing car ownership on the population of Atlanta's black ghetto. They found their geographical and social isolation increased by the construction of new highways that took white Atlantans to new homes outside the city.

error. Such approaches are imbued with traditional notions of technology as neutral, driven largely by the logic of technical development. In fact, it is quite possible to identify a series of powerful class interests that moulded the way in which ideas about the car, road transport and road safety developed. Increasing numbers of middle-class motorists, and the various industrial and commercial groupings who benefited from the growth of motoring, were highly influential in these developments. Middle-class motorists appreciated the advantages the car brought them and increasingly saw the casualties that mass motoring brought as the fault of a series of scapegoats - from foreign chauffeurs to careless pedestrians. The concept of a new science of road safety, centring on the education of all road-users rather than further restrictions on motorists, appealed to influential sections of society. Commercial motoring interests pushed this line, financing the propaganda campaigns of the National Safety First Association (NSFA). The middle sections of this chapter will describe this process, employing previously unused archival material to explain its importance in the way in which government and society came to terms with a dangerous technology.

The final section will examine the impact these ideas had in terms of the control of traffic and planning in the urban environment. A case study of Manchester will prove fruitful as a means of examining changing reactions to the car. It will also reveal that on occasion local authorities, with responsibility for their own transport systems and to their own citizens, had different priorities than national government. However, it will be seen that motoring interests were also influential in this sphere. Indeed, as the period drew to a close it was clear that motoring groups expected that

the urban environment and the way people lived in those environments would change to accommodate the car rather than the other way around.

## The Historiography of Road Safety

In 1993 the *Guardian*'s educational supplement featured a story on the history of road safety. Its opening sentence was striking:

More than half a million people have been killed on Britain's roads this century, but that figure would be far worse were it not for the many road-safety measures that have accompanied the history of the motor car.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is difficult to imagine half a million deaths from any other cause being treated in such an off-hand manner. The car has become such a dominant artefact in everyday life that death and destruction, as by-products of mass car ownership, have been accepted as a natural and inevitable part of modern living. Robert Davis has made this point very forcefully in his book *Death on the Streets*. He outlines what he calls an ideology of road safety, identifying ideology as

a body of ideas and attitudes, generally in a derogatory sense because the ideology mystifies or distorts reality. It works as part of a particular power structure, in a set of social relations, and helps maintain that structure. Ideology sets hidden agendas of discussion, forms background assumptions about the nature of those discussions and, above all, makes certain features of a society appear natural or necessary.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the case of the car, society convinces itself that the high casualty figures that accompany mass motoring can gradually be eradicated by increasing safety

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<sup>[4]</sup> *Guardian*, 7 December 1993.

<sup>[5]</sup> R. Davis, *Death on the Streets: Cars and the Mythology of Road Safety* (Hawes, 1993), p. 37.

measures, overseen by the various road safety professionals - traffic police, road and vehicle engineers, road safety officers and so on. Earlier anger about motoring accidents has become muted as concepts of road safety have taken on a neutral, more scientific image. In effect, the dangers brought by motor vehicles have been legitimated. According to Davis the process has been deeply influenced by a motoring lobby whose ideological and political interests have become dominant. He acknowledges that efforts by road safety specialists can be effective, citing anti-drink-driving campaigns as an example. However, large numbers of casualties are inevitable in the use of a technology with such a high potential for causing harm.<sup>[6]</sup>

Historical writing has not investigated the hypothesis suggested by Davis. In fact there has been a tendency to tacitly accept the outlook he criticises. Accounts of road safety legislation offered by Kenneth Richardson<sup>[7]</sup> and Harold Perkin<sup>[8]</sup> both fall into this category. These studies are largely technologically orientated, Perkin for example talks of the 'triumph of the internal combustion engine'<sup>[9]</sup> which gives developments in motoring a feeling of scientific inevitability. Richardson's work also transmits the sense that the car as a technology has its own teleological logic that mere humans inevitably accept. Thus, he says of the 20 mph speed limit in force between 1903 and 1930, 'the speed limit of 20 miles an hour laid down in the 1903 Act was being universally disregarded and rightly held to be far too low for the

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<sup>[6]</sup> Davis, *Death on the Streets*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>[7]</sup> K. Richardson, *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939*, (1977).

<sup>[8]</sup> H. Perkin, *The Age Of The Automobile* (1976).

<sup>[9]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

engines of the time'.<sup>[10]</sup> There is therefore much that can be added to our knowledge by a conceptual framework which offers insights into the fact that technological developments can embody specific forms of power and authority.

The major work in this area is William Plowden's *The Motor Car and Politics*<sup>[11]</sup> which provides an informed interpretation of the competing claims of various interest groups that influenced government policy towards motor transport. His account provides a useful antidote to those studies which fail to report this process. He identified the central role of the private car in debates about the 'motor problem'. As Tables One and Three indicate the involvement of the private car in large numbers of road deaths guaranteed its unpopularity in some circles. Thus, Table One demonstrates that, in these two years, private cars were involved in approximately 30 per cent of road accidents.

**Table One**  
**The Involvement of Motor Vehicles in Fatal Road**  
**Accidents: By Number and Percentage, 1932 and 1933**

<b>Vehicle</b>	<b>1932</b>	<b>1933</b>
<b>Private Cars</b>	1,914 (29%)	2,167 (30%)
<b>Vans, Lorries etc</b>	1,346 (20%)	1,438 (20)
<b>Motorcycles</b>	1,733 (26%)	1,712 (24%)
<b>Buses, Coaches</b>	591 (9%)	566 (8%)
<b>Total Deaths</b>	<b>6667</b>	<b>7202</b>

Source: *Autocar*, 16 February 1934.

However, at this time, the total number of private cars amounted to just over half the total number of vehicle registrations: 52 per cent in 1933 as Table Two indicates.

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<sup>[10]</sup> Richardson, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 177.

<sup>[11]</sup> W. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics* (Bungay, 1973).

**Table Two**  
**Vehicles in Use 1919-1939 (000s)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Cars</b>	<b>TWMVs</b>	<b>PSVs</b>	<b>Taxis</b>	<b>GVs</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Trams</b>
<b>1919</b>	110	115			62		13
<b>1920</b>	187	288			101		13
<b>1921</b>	243	373			128	19	14
<b>1922</b>	315	378			151	31	14
<b>1923</b>	384	430			173	32	14
<b>1924</b>	474	496			203	33	14
<b>1925</b>	580	572			224	35	14
<b>1926</b>	684	637	40	61	257	37	14
<b>1927</b>	787	681	42	53	283	39	14
<b>1928</b>	885	713	46	49	306	40	14
<b>1929</b>	981	731	50	48	330	42	14
<b>1930</b>	1,056	724	53	48	348	44	14
<b>1931</b>	1,083	627	49	38	361	43	13
<b>1932</b>	1,128	600	47	38	390	44	13
<b>1933</b>	1,203	563	46	39	387	47	12
<b>1934</b>	1,308	548	46	38	413	50	12
<b>1935</b>	1,477	517	47	39	435	56	11
<b>1936</b>	1,643	506	49	35	459	64	10
<b>1937</b>	1,798	488	51	35	479	78	10
<b>1938</b>	1,944	462	53		495	96	9
<b>1939</b>	2,034	418			488	118	8

Source: B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988).

The car had a greater prominence in road safety debates than these figures might have suggested for a number of reasons. This was a time when the average private car was estimated to cover 8,000 miles per annum in comparison with the 16,000 of

Taxis, 33,100 of buses and 16,000 of goods vehicles.<sup>[12]</sup> It was also, as we have seen, a period when many cars were used solely for leisure, giving accidents involving the car a different twist to those involving goods or public service vehicles. For the victim of a road accident it may have been easier to see the necessity of a bus full of passengers driving into town than that of the car owner out for a spin. Furthermore, as Table Three reveals, non-motorists made up by far the largest proportion of accident victims. This combination of factors would have guaranteed that the car's role in road casualties received frequent coverage. However, Plowden also identified the vociferous role of the AA in defending private motoring interests. In the process they ensured that the car never left the general public's mind when the issue of road casualties was raised.

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<sup>[12]</sup> Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, *The Motor Industry of Great Britain* (1935).

**Table Three**  
**Road Fatalities 1926-1938:**  
**Numbers and percentage by Road User Type**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Pedestrians</b>	<b>Cyclists</b>	<b>Motor-cyclists</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1926</b>	-	-	-	-	4886
<b>1927</b>	2774 (52 %)	644 (12 %)	1175 (22 %)	735 (14 %)	5329
<b>1928</b>	3255 (53 %)	691 (11 %)	1395 (23 %)	797 (13 %)	6138
<b>1929</b>	3523 (53 %)	795 (12 %)	1582 (24 %)	796 (12 %)	6696
<b>1930</b>	3722 (51 %)	887 (12 %)	1832 (25 %)	864 (12 %)	7305
<b>1931</b>	3467 (52 %)	926 (14 %)	1499 (22 %)	799 (12 %)	6691
<b>1932</b>	3385 (51 %)	1046 (16 %)	1558 (23 %)	678 (10 %)	6667
<b>1933</b>	3504 (49 %)	1354 (18 %)	1569 (22 %)	775 (11 %)	7202
<b>1934</b>	3529 (48 %)	1536 (21 %)	1430 (19 %)	848 (12 %)	7343
<b>1935</b>	3073 (47 %)	1400 (22 %)	1277 (20 %)	752 (12 %)	6502
<b>1936</b>	3068 (47 %)	1498 (23 %)	1187 (18 %)	808 (12 %)	6561
<b>1937</b>	3002 (45 %)	1416 (21 %)	1151 (17 %)	1064 (16 %)	6633
<b>1938</b>	3046 (46 %)	1401 (21 %)	1145 (17 %)	1056 (16 %)	6648

Source: The Department of Transport, *Road Accident's, Great Britain*, 1991.

Plowden also catalogued the ebb and flow of events and factors which dictated changing perceptions of road safety. Amongst these were the technical arguments which were put forward by various parties, the status of each of the Ministers



involved in the process, their individual determination to find solutions, the relative importance of road safety as an issue at any given time and the subsequent allocation of parliamentary time.<sup>[13]</sup> His work exhaustively explores the long-winded process of negotiation between governments and the motoring lobby in the 1920s about how law affecting the motor car could be brought in line with 'technical developments'.<sup>[14]</sup> In doing so, it describes the manner in which the motoring lobby were provided with drafts of bills for their perusal, a procedure which Plowden describes as a 'strange act of abdication'. This illustrates the motoring lobby's success in manipulating the legislative agenda. They were consulted at every stage of each government initiative and although government policy did not always meet with their approval, they were often successful in limiting the extent of motoring legislation.

Plowden's work also has its limitations, in particular a failure to explain the extent to which the motoring lobby was able to employ the politics and language of laissez-faire to subtly influence national policy. There is no investigation of the part played by the National Safety First Association in the development of road safety policy. It was nominally an independent organisation, which came to be recognised by the government as the official body for the propagation of road safety propaganda. However, its agenda was set by the road lobby, who provided much of the finance and many of the officers of the organisation.

More recently, Clive Emsley's account of the development of road traffic legislation was a welcome addition to this largely uninvestigated area of twentieth

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<sup>[13]</sup> Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, pp. 117-120.

<sup>[14]</sup> *ibid.*, pp.117 ff.

century history. However, his interpretation is heavily reliant on Plowden and exhibits an even greater misconception about the NSFA.<sup>[15]</sup> Emsley employs V.A.C. Gatrell's concept of the 'policeman state' to explain the development of motoring legislation.<sup>[16]</sup> This envisages the criminal justice system as having 'generated its own momentum', as experts and bureaucrats set about solving the perceived problems of the day. Emsley consequently rejects the idea that motoring legislation was inspired by class interest. In this respect he pays less regard to Gatrell's belief that historians 'might profitably remind themselves that the history of crime is a grim subject, not because it is about crime, but because it is about power'.<sup>[17]</sup> Gatrell's advice will be accepted here as the role of capital and class in the evolution of road traffic legislation, road safety policy and ultimately in the remoulding of the urban landscape is acknowledged.

As Plowden before him, Emsley's failure to investigate the role of the NSFA will be seen to be an important omission. James Foreman-Peck's analysis of differing national responses makes clear the significance of this oversight.<sup>[18]</sup> He reports that the cost of road accidents in 1938 was estimated at 1.3 per cent of GNP, a figure

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[15] Clive Emsley, '"Mother, what did policemen do when there weren't any motors?" The law, the police and the regulation of motor traffic in England, 1900-1939', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 357-381.

[16] V.A.C. Gatrell, 'Crime, authority and the policeman state', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, (3 vols, Cambridge, 1990), vol. 3, pp.243-310.

[17] *ibid.*, p. 246.

[18] J. Foreman-Peck, 'Death on the Roads: Changing National Responses to Motor Accidents', in T. Barker (ed), *The Economic and Social Effects of the Spread of Motor Vehicles* (Hong Kong, 1987), pp. 264-290.

which he describes as 'a deliberately downward-biased calculation of accident costs'.<sup>[19]</sup> This is a massive figure, approximately equivalent to agriculture's contribution to GNP at that time. Yet, the policy reaction was strangely muted, a function of what he describes as the

distribution of the costs and benefits of motor vehicles among the affected population. Those affected by accidents were generally not in a position to influence policy very much and those at risk were subject to such low probabilities (sic) that were easy to ignore.<sup>[20]</sup>

In particular, he identifies the role of the 'powerful pro-motoring pressure groups which had an interest in avoiding constraints on motor vehicles'.<sup>[21]</sup> In Britain the SMMT made no secret of its intent to answer any press article of 'an anti-motoring nature'.<sup>[22]</sup> Legislative adjustment for the negative social consequences of motor vehicles was easiest in countries with no indigenous motor manufacturing industry, who together with the wider motoring lobby would protest about the suppression of an emerging industry. Thus, it was the Scandinavian nations, with few motor vehicles in use by international standards, who from 1903 onwards were amongst the earliest and most stringent legislators.<sup>[23]</sup>

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<sup>[19]</sup> The figure is taken from J.H. Jones, *Road Accidents: Report*, (1946). Cited in Foreman-Peck, p. 269.

<sup>[20]</sup> Foreman-Peck, 'Death on the Roads', p. 269.

<sup>[21]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>[22]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>[23]</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270. These states first imposed accident liability upon the car-owner. Such laws could only be generally effective with compulsory insurance if road accident victims were to be compensated. The Scandinavians led the field here too, introducing legislation in 1918.

It is clear, therefore, that the role of the motoring lobby requires serious attention. It is essential to describe the process by which society arrived at a concordance with the motor car and how an ideology of road safety had a part to play in that process. However, it will prove useful to begin by outlining the process by which the responsibility for road accidents shifted from the technology - the car - to various types of motorist who could be offered up as scapegoats for the negative consequences of increased motoring. Once the notion arose that it was individual drivers and not the car itself that was the fundamental problem it became possible for the motoring lobby to promote the idea that planning and education could eventually provide a solution.

### **‘Outside the Brotherhood of the Road’ The Construction of Motoring Scapegoats**

On its arrival, in the years around the turn of the twentieth century, the motor car was met with a great deal of criticism. The representatives of motoring groups often found themselves on a defensive footing. A particular problem for them was the widely propagated notion that motorists were largely rich arrogant joy-riders, out to have fun at everyone else's expense. The *Economist* was not least among motoring's antagonists. In 1908 it condemned a government suggestion that road improvements might have helped prevent accidents, claiming that 'public expenditure is calmly

suggested in order to please the richest class of pleasure seeker'.<sup>[24]</sup> In 1912 it stated that it was

amazing that in a civilised community... the pursuit of pleasure in our streets and high roads should be allowed to cause...this enormous loss of life, limb and property.<sup>[25]</sup>

In 1913 it remarked that

The vehicles of the rich kill and maim far more people than the vehicles of the poor...But then nearly all politicians and officials constantly drive at an excessive speed themselves.<sup>[26]</sup>

It is clear that deaths and injuries involving the car had the potential to bring the wealthiest sections of society into conflict with the majority who were not car-owners. One outcome of the threat of class friction over the private car was the creation, within the motoring community, of a series of scapegoats. These groups were often held responsible for the bad driving that initiated public antagonism towards the private car. Thus in 1919 the motoring correspondent of *The Times* wrote that:

The speed fiend is no motorist, nor is the man who regards a car merely as a sort of animated armchair.. ...but they may be safely ignored as outside the brotherhood of the road.<sup>[27]</sup>

Some of these scapegoats were more transient than others, reflecting contemporary issues and prejudices. Evidence already considered in the chapter on gender suggests that the woman driver represented a handy scapegoat for many. Indeed the use of the term 'brotherhood of the road' is revealing. However, over the years, a plethora of

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<sup>[24]</sup> *Economist*, 26 September 1908. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 69.

<sup>[25]</sup> *Economist*, 13 April 1912. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 86.

<sup>[26]</sup> *ibid.*, 23 August 1913. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 86.

<sup>[27]</sup> *The Times*, 18 January 1919.

alternatives were offered. For example, in the years immediately following the war, a very frequent whipping boy in the letters pages of the motoring press was the nouveau riche war-profiteer. Driving skill and natural road manners were seen as an intuitive property of the class of motorist who had driven before the war, that is, the most wealthy. An editorial in the *Autocar* in May 1919 expressed its concern with the spread of car ownership and the problems this could engender:

the present scramble for cars does not necessarily seem to be entirely one amongst pre-war motorists. Rather, it would seem that it originates mostly from a certain class of individual who have grown rich out of the war, and now must motor at all costs. Such individuals are apt to prove, perhaps, a danger, and certainly a nuisance, to other road users, and to adopt a somewhat overbearing attitude towards all who do not get out of their way.<sup>[28]</sup>

In 1920, Alderman Ashton told a Manchester council meeting of his concern over the 'number of reckless and impudent drivers in Manchester who required curbing'. He was afraid that some of the 'men who had recently become rich and had bought motorcars had not the consideration for other people that gentlemen would have'.<sup>[29]</sup> From the earliest days of motoring bad driving had been associated with servants or the newly rich. In 1903 *Justice of the Peace* singled out foreign chauffeurs as a problem. This group were doubly attractive as scapegoats, being both servants and non-English.<sup>[30]</sup> In the same year *The Times* maintained that the 'road hog' was drawn mainly

from a class which possesses money in excess of brains or culture, and which has not had an opportunity of learning insensibly, in the course of generations, the consideration for the rights of others which is part

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<sup>[28]</sup> *Autocar*, 21 June 1919.

<sup>[29]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 19 February 1920.

<sup>[30]</sup> Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 28.

of the natural heritage of gentlefolk. For people of his order the law is an educational influence of the highest value; and when he has once received the ineffaceable stamp of the gaolbird society may be expected, before long, to range itself on the side of the law, and to complete the reformation which it will be the work of the magistracy to begin.<sup>[31]</sup>

Twenty years later, the vogue for attaching blame for poor driving to new motorists extended to criticism of those who took to the wheel of the new baby cars of the period, such as the Austin Seven, the biggest selling British car of the 1920s. In 1926 a correspondent to the leading motoring magazine put it as follows:

I am on the road a good deal, and in my opinion the driving of the public gets worse and worse, not so much from incompetence as through absolutely wilful caddishness and bad manners. I presume that the class of person who nowadays go about in motor cars and who, ten years ago, were riding in buses like to think themselves gentlemen. I submit that it would be greatly to the public benefit if they went a little further and behaved as such!<sup>[32]</sup>

He went on to identify this class of driver with the new popular and cheaper small car. Others offered further categories of driver that were held to be causing a blemish on motoring's reputation. Owners of American cars were often characterised as unpatriotic, as well as being described as the most 'inconsiderate on the road'<sup>[33]</sup> by several correspondents in the *Autocar*. Another denounced fat people for their selfishness and inconsiderate attitude at the wheel,<sup>[34]</sup> whilst a

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<sup>[31]</sup> *The Times*, 1 August 1903. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics* pp. 27-8.

<sup>[32]</sup> *Autocar*, 17 September 1926.

<sup>[33]</sup> *Autocar*, 22 August 1930.

<sup>[34]</sup> *Autocar*, 1 August 1924.

further debate emerged around the alleged merits and demerits of young and old drivers.<sup>[35]</sup>

After 1926 letters about the demerits of upwardly mobile members of society virtually disappeared from the *Autocar*. It was at this time that Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, was making his first raid on the road fund. The fund was established in 1909 with what motoring groups thought was a sacred promise that the monies collected be used exclusively for road building and maintenance. Churchill's *modus operandi* was to portray motoring as a luxury hobby.<sup>[36]</sup> As such, car owners should expect to contribute to the national coffers when times were difficult. In response, the motoring organisations and magazines naturally sought to emphasise the increasingly diverse social groups who were using motor vehicles for everyday business reasons. Perhaps Churchill's move, and the fear of further taxation on motoring, because of its perceived luxury status, persuaded motorists that the spread of car ownership throughout the various levels of the middle classes was a blessing rather than a curse. Or, more probably, the editors of motoring journals made a policy decision not to publish letters attacking members of social groups new to the motoring community. As was seen in the last chapter, the editor of the *Autocar* did at one point announce his decision to publish no more letters on the divisive subject of the woman driver. The arbiters of motoring opinion were wary that legislation relating to the car was still a matter for debate and they perceived the need to nurture a strong sense of common interest amongst all motorists. Motoring magazines were also a commercial enterprise and therefore bound to seek to appeal

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<sup>[35]</sup> See, for example, *Autocar*, 29 September 1933.

<sup>[36]</sup> Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, pp. 208-9.



to as large a number of readers as possible. It is possible that the number of published letters from drivers maligning their contemporaries, from a gendered or class perspective, represent only the tip of an unpublished iceberg.

### **The National Safety First Association and Road Safety**

The notions of class rehearsed above, together with those on gender, were influential in the framing of motoring legislation. If various categories of drivers were identified as the problem, it followed that the car itself was largely absolved of responsibility. Furthermore, the car offered personal mobility, convenience and freedom for a significant and increasing minority of the population: significant because of their relative wealth and position in the professional and commercial middle-classes. National interests were also tied up with the economic success of the motor industry. In 1939 the SMMT estimated that 1,385,000 jobs were directly or indirectly dependent on the motor industry.<sup>[37]</sup> By 1936 the industry exported 65,000 cars, only marginally below the combined French, German and Italian exports.<sup>[38]</sup> By the late 1930s it was also increasingly apparent that the motor industry would be called upon to make a vital military contribution to the nation. Thus, as has been pointed out, the motoring lobby was very powerful and British governments were unlikely to introduce radical measures to curb car use, notwithstanding the high economic cost of motor accidents.

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<sup>[37]</sup> Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, *The Motor Industry of Great Britain 1939*, (1939).

<sup>[38]</sup> Bowden, 'The Inter-war UK Car Industry', Table 2.

Discussion of the road safety problem was increasingly sprinkled with appeals to English common sense. In 1929, *The Times* castigated the Labour M.P. Dr Alfred Salter for describing road casualties as a 'calamitous holocaust of pedestrian life', viewing such language as an attempt 'to divide mankind into two irreconcilable classes'.<sup>[39]</sup> In 1931 it was calling for cooperation between motorists and pedestrians against the common enemy, selfishness, an enemy that was not likely to be defeated

so long as selfish men and women are able to salve their consciences by enrolling themselves in rival organisations and exhibiting a partisan spirit wholly foreign to the traditions of the English highway.<sup>[40]</sup>

This call for a vision of a united body politic failed to take account of the reality of the skewed balance of power in this debate. On one side were marshalled the large and influential motoring organisations, their influential membership from the professional and business middle-classes, the commercial motor interests and motor manufacturers, as well as the road building lobby as represented by the British Roads Federation and the Roads Improvement Association. Dwarfed by these groups, on the other side of the argument, was the Pedestrians' Association. The apparently neutral rhetoric of road safety was, in fact, heavily influenced by the motoring lobby. At the heart of this process were the NSFA, who came to be recognised by successive governments as the official agency for road safety and were funded accordingly. The NSFA had enormous influence in the evolving conception of road safety. The organisation's archives reveal the regularity with which its observations appeared in the press. For example, between July 23 and November 11 1930 newspapers carried

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<sup>[39]</sup> *The Times*, 6 and 9 November 1929.

<sup>[40]</sup> *The Times*, 4 April 1931.

821 mentions of their campaigns.<sup>[41]</sup> Regular road safety warnings on the BBC were also based on advice from the NSFA.<sup>[42]</sup> The organisation also sowed its perspective on road safety amongst official opinion, distributing free copies of its journal *Safety First* amongst Chief Constables, Borough Surveyors and others involved in traffic administration.<sup>[43]</sup> Emsley considers the NSFA to have been a neutral body, stating that its general secretary was in favour of the abolition of the speed limit in 1930.<sup>[44]</sup> Foreman-Peck describes them as a pressure group, who opposed the motoring lobby from the 1920s onwards.<sup>[45]</sup> Given the organisation's name, it is easy to make this assumption. Even Plowden's exhaustive enquiry failed to examine the history, membership and funding of this organisation, although it does indicate that the Pedestrians' Association were suspicious of the NSFA's close links with the motoring lobby.<sup>[46]</sup> A brief survey of the NSFA will suggest that it was far from being a neutral agency.

The NSFA grew out of the London Safety First Association, formed in 1916.<sup>[47]</sup> Its industrial wing was doctrinally laissez-faire, favouring voluntary measures and safety education within factories rather than legislation. This approach

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[41] Archives of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents: National Safety First Association file D266/2/11.

[42] *ibid.*, D/266/2/29.

[43] *ibid.*, D266/2/11.

[44] Emsley, 'The Regulation of Motor Traffic', p. 376.

[45] Foreman-Peck, 'Death on the Roads', pp. 269-70.

[46] Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 288.

[47] In 1941 it was granted the royal charter and became part of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents.

was replicated in its road safety propaganda, which continually stressed the responsibility of the pedestrian in accident prevention. Such a philosophy attracted the motoring lobby, its chief source of private sector finance. During the early years of its existence the NSFA claimed its financial liquidity was due to 'the exceptional - and solitary - generosity of Mr. Gordon Stewart [who] has kept the road safety campaign alive'.<sup>[48]</sup> Stewart funded their campaigns with donations totalling £4425 between 1931 and 1934.<sup>[49]</sup> He was the Managing Director of Stewart and Arden Ltd, the main London dealers for Morris Motors and obviously would not have provided such sums for a body likely to call for greater restrictions on motoring. A letter from the NSFA, published in *The Times* in 1933, demonstrates that the organisation did exactly the opposite:

The concluding words of your leading article to-day exactly define what has always been the contention of the National 'Safety First' Association - namely, that 'safety appears to be much more a matter of education and of administration than of altering the law'.<sup>[50]</sup>

At that point the NSFA were campaigning against the reintroduction of the speed limit for private motor vehicles. This campaign was fought in the face of increasing public concern at rising casualties since the abolition of the 20 mph limit in 1930. Their stance was backed by funding of £1000 provided by the AA and

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<sup>[48]</sup> PRO MT 34/142: Accidents: Contribution from the Road Fund Towards a Campaign for the Reduction of Accidents, 1933-35.

<sup>[49]</sup> *ibid.*, The sums involved were £1,025 in 1931, £1,000 in 1932 and 1933 and £1,400 in 1934.

<sup>[50]</sup> Archives of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents: National Safety First Association file D266 2/29.

SMMT under the cover of the Motor Legislation Committee.<sup>[51]</sup> The NSFA was also funded by very healthy advertising receipts from their safe driving publications, over £19,000 being received between 1929 and 1932.<sup>[52]</sup> Many of the advertisements were placed by motor manufacturers, motor dealers, component manufacturers, the AA and RAC. This financial backing was matched by an eagerness to direct NSFA policy by serving within its organisation. Its list of leading officers in 1932, for example, reads like a who's who of motoring interests. The chairmen of the AA, the Omnibus Owners Association, and RAC acted as vice-presidents, as did the presidents of the Commercial Motor Users Association, and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. This group was reinforced by the presence of Herbert Austin of Austin Motors, who took his place as the representative of the National Union of Manufacturers.<sup>[53]</sup>

As an alternative to legislation, the NSFA consistently led campaigns to 'educate' the non-motoring public, particularly children. The NSFA also called for increasing segregation of different types of road-user and the scientific analysis of road accidents. These policies had a wide appeal for a number of reasons, although as will be seen their claims to offer a neutral scientific approach should be treated sceptically.

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[51] Pedestrians' Association, *Occasional Newsletter*, October 1934. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 288. The Motor Legislation Committee was a national pressure group set up in 1919 by the AA and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders.

[52] PRO MT 34/142: Accidents: Contribution from the Road Fund Towards a Campaign for the Reduction of Accidents, 1933-35. The annual sums were £5478 in 1929, £5458 in 1930, £5202 in 1931 and £3086 in 1932.

[53] PRO MT 34/142: Accidents: Contribution from the Road Fund Towards a Campaign for the Reduction of Accidents, 1933-35.

## **The Emergence of an Ideology of Road Safety**

The new approaches to road safety suggested by the NSFA proved attractive for a number of reasons. In one way or another they appealed to the interests of a variety of groups. Firstly, they proved highly convenient for motoring interests whose sponsorship of the NSFA was motivated by a desire to ensure legislation did not affect them commercially. Secondly, they appealed because they offered a largely laissez-faire approach to a political establishment still fundamentally inclined to such a philosophy. Indeed, the Conservative election slogan in the late 1920s, 'Safety First', was borrowed from the NSFA. Thirdly, as prosecutions of middle-class motorists increased, with consequent embarrassment and call on police and court resources, the NSFA policies offered the hope of progress through education rather than coercion. Fourthly, the road safety policies of the NSFA had an unconscious appeal to legislators, law enforcers and opinion formers, such as journalists, as they became car owners themselves. They no doubt began to realise that one day their ownership of that technology could result in their being labelled as selfish road hogs. The reliance which each of these groups came to place on what Davis calls the ideology of road safety will now be examined. Their motivations will be investigated and it will be suggested that efforts to place road safety policy on a scientific footing were doomed from the start. Too many of the issues they sought to evaluate were not conducive to objective analysis. An assortment of political, economic and self-interests were heavily involved in the issue of road safety.

Road casualty figures, and the publicity that accompanied them, were not good news for motor manufacturers. Many first-time car buyers were from the middle-

aged middle-class, whose steady career progression, mortgage repayments and childrens' school fees had prevented purchasing a car at an earlier date.<sup>[54]</sup> Such buyers were likely to be prone to nervousness at the thought of purchasing a machine which might lead them into physical danger, as well as possible litigation. Manufacturers were understandably keen to minimise talk about the danger of the car at every possible occasion.<sup>[55]</sup> Whereas the individual motorist might apportion blame for motoring accidents to some form of motoring 'other', such an approach was problematic for any manufacturer seeking maximum sales.

A more appealing option was offered by what was, on the face of it, a more logical, scientific, assessment of the road accident problem. A feature of the response to escalating road casualties was an increasing emphasis, pushed by the NSFA from the mid-1920s, on the analysis of road accident data. Once again, the spotlight was removed from the car, as various groups sought to make use of the statistics to support their own theories and interests. The motoring organisations, in particular, made the most of any figures purporting to show that pedestrians were often responsible for accidents. Thus, pedestrians were condemned for their negligence, becoming regular scapegoats in the motoring press, which combed Chief Constables' reports to glean statements about pedestrian carelessness. In 1929, for example, the

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<sup>[54]</sup> K. Richardson, *The British Motor Industry*, contended that many new motorists in the 1930s were middle aged. This would have been a consequence of the pattern of rising real incomes, identified in chapter one, as well as the painfully slow career progress of many middle class men discussed in R. Samuel, 'Middle Class Between The Wars' *New Society*, January-June, 1981.

<sup>[55]</sup> *The Advertiser's Weekly*, for example, reported that they were particularly sensitive about the portrayal of motoring as dangerous in advertising by manufacturers of other products.

Chief Constable of Liverpool was reported to have described the pedestrians there as the worst in the world, blaming them for 75 per cent of traffic accidents.<sup>[56]</sup>

The scientific presentation of the road accident statistical findings also allowed for a move away from the actuality of dead and injured citizens, and any concomitant emotive discussion, towards the self-professed science of traffic control of Alker Tripp, the Assistant Commissioner of police at Scotland Yard, who wrote coldly of the need for cyclists to become an 'efficient traffic unit'.<sup>[57]</sup> The collection of road accident data was subject to innumerable flaws, not least of these being the deaths of many potential witnesses, particularly pedestrian ones. This much is evident, from figures which consistently placed a higher degree of responsibility for accidents on pedestrians in the case of fatal accidents than non-fatal ones (See Table Four).

**Table Four**  
**Analysis of 100,000 traffic accidents: 1935-6**

<b>Attributed to:</b>	<b>Fatal: 1935</b>	<b>Fatal: 1936</b>	<b>Non-Fatal: 1936</b>
<b>Pedestrian error</b>	40.7%	36.5%	27.9%
<b>Driver error</b>	31.7%	32.4%	33%
<b>Cyclist error</b>	16.5%	19.%	26.4%

Source: *The Times*, 1 April 1937.

For example, the Ministry of Transport calculated that 36.5 per cent of fatal road accidents in 1936 could be attributed to pedestrians, whereas the figures for non-fatal accidents were only 27.9 per cent. It would appear that some motorists took

<sup>[56]</sup> *Autocar*, 19 April 1929.

<sup>[57]</sup> H. Alker Tripp, *Town Planning and Road Traffic*, (1942) pp. 28-9.



advantage of the unavailability of pedestrian witnesses to escape possible liability for their actions.<sup>[58]</sup>

Compiling the details of accidents was often the responsibility of a single police officer who, for a variety of reasons, could not always be relied upon to produce accurate data. The first potential problem was that of assessing competing interpretations of the events leading up to an accident. Furthermore, constables often displayed 'considerable laxity' and 'gross carelessness' in recording the circumstances of street accidents with, for example, vehicle registration numbers often recorded inaccurately.<sup>[59]</sup> However, the officer's verdict was the one which went towards the compilation of the official statistics. Accident reports, such as that presented by the House of Lords select committee on the prevention of road accidents, which analysed 100,000 road accidents which took place in 1937, were also based on several categories tending to attribute blame, for a significant number of the accidents, to pedestrians. For example, 64.7 per cent of all fatal, and 57.4 per cent of all non-fatal, accidents were assigned to pedestrians who were described as 'heedless of traffic', or as 'walking or running out in front of or behind a vehicle or object which masked his or her movement'. These categories were not interrogated in any way. If visibility was obscured should not motor vehicles have been travelling at a speed which took account of that factor? In effect, society sought solace for growing road casualties in the belief that the study of road accident causes would lead to the design

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<sup>[58]</sup> *The Times*, 1 April 1937.

<sup>[59]</sup> J. Klein, 'A new breed of law breaker: how traffic law influenced class relations between the police and the public in the interwar period', p. 3. Paper delivered at the *Social History Society Annual Conference*, 1994.

of new roads and propaganda campaigns, that would all but eliminate road casualties.<sup>[60]</sup>

The neutral, scientific, language of road accident reports was paralleled by the discourse within which much of the discussion on road safety took place. The debate was conducted in what were seen as the best English traditions of moderation, with the accent on 'reasonableness', 'the avoidance of panic and extreme measures', and 'seeing the other fellow's point of view'.<sup>[61]</sup> The 1930 Road Traffic Act removed the speed limit on the grounds that the great majority of motorists could be entrusted to drive with due care and attention. The few bad apples, or 'road hogs', would be dealt with by tougher maximum penalties for dangerous or reckless driving. Meanwhile, the introduction of compulsory third party insurance would cover the financial consequences of any accident. At the same time, it was argued that *The Highway Code*, rather than legislative restrictions, would have the best results with the free-born British motorist. The Minister of Transport, Morrison, and various motoring interests were quick to seize on any evidence that *The Highway Code* was succeeding in encouraging improved driving. Describing the principles behind it in 1931, Morrison said that it

goes upon the basis that this is what the decent drivers will do, and that it is just as ungentlemanly to be discourteous or to play the fool on the King's highway as it would be for a man to push his wife off her chair at the Sunday tea table and grab two pieces of cake.<sup>[62]</sup>

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<sup>[60]</sup> House of Lords select committee on prevention of road accidents, *Report and evidence*, HL 35, 192 (1937-8); *Report and evidence*, HL2, (1938-9). For a critique of these reports see J.S. Dean, *Murder Most Foul*, (1947), p. 12ff. Dean was a leading member of the Pedestrians' Association.

<sup>[61]</sup> Dean, *Murder Most Foul*, (1947), p. 47.

<sup>[62]</sup> *News Chronicle*, 17 July 1931.

Commenting in the same year on a 10 per cent fall in London's accident figures, Morrison argued that:

The moral is plain. Tell the motorist, in parliamentary language, that he is a gentleman and should drive like one, remove the element of compulsion inherent in a speed limit, substitute a 'highway code' of a purely persuasive character, and the motorist will rise to the occasion and agreeably surprise the pedestrian.<sup>[63]</sup>

This emphasis on compromise was a feature of every aspect of the blossoming ideology of road safety. NSFA road safety propaganda films had titles steeped in a discourse of 'Englishness', employing classless sporting references, such as *Sportsmanship on Wheels* and *Playing the Game*.<sup>[64]</sup> Appropriately enough, Gracie Fields, whose films, such as *Sing As We Go*, portrayed an image of national consensus recorded the road safety song *Look to the Left, and Look to the Right*.<sup>[65]</sup> Fields was herself a keen motorist.

Much of the language which appeared in the media was framed in a similar vocabulary, stressing the need for national consensus over class friction. Thus, in the early 1930s, the Pedestrians' Association was refused air time on the BBC on the grounds that 'it was undesirable to excite controversy'.<sup>[66]</sup> Instead, the BBC chose motorists, particularly racing drivers, to give a series of talks. In 1934 the Pedestrians' Association wrote to Sir John Reith to protest at the imbalance, arguing that:

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<sup>[63]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 24 July 1931.

<sup>[64]</sup> PRO MT 34/142 Accidents: Contribution from the Road Fund towards a Campaign for the Reduction of Accidents 1933-35.

<sup>[65]</sup> *Autocar*, 13 March 1936.

<sup>[66]</sup> Pedestrians' Association, *Quarterly Newsletter*, January 1935.

Nothing has, in our opinion, done more to make the roads what they are to-day than this delegation to motorists of the task of saying what constitutes safety. It is surely wrong that after sixteen years of continually rising casualties, little or nothing should have been heard over the wireless on behalf of pedestrians, whose point of view is necessarily different from that of other road users.<sup>[67]</sup>

They received no reply from Reith. A letter from a 'minor official' informed them that all road safety issues were dealt with in consultation with the Ministry of Transport. The series, on 'road sense', came to an end when one of the participating racing drivers involved was imprisoned for manslaughter.<sup>[68]</sup>

The press, like the BBC, followed the lead set by government and entrusted much of its coverage of road safety issues to 'Our Motoring Correspondent'. Alternatively, the opinion of the motoring associations was sought and their influence should not be underestimated. The AA and RAC were massive commercial concerns with a great deal to gain from the continued expansion of motoring but the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, described them as an 'unimpeachable authority'.<sup>[69]</sup>

Equally important, when considering changing press attitudes to the car, was the increasing number of motoring readers, as well as the advertising revenue newspapers and magazines received from commercial motoring interests. In December 1934, Tom Foley, the president of the Pedestrians' Association, corresponded with the editor of the *Daily Herald* and its TUC backers about its coverage of road safety. He believed that:

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<sup>[67]</sup> Pedestrians' Association, *Quarterly Newsletter*, January 1935.

<sup>[68]</sup> Dean, *Murder Most Foul*, p. 89.

<sup>[69]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 24 July 1931.

The *Herald* has made no effective protest against this disgraceful state of affairs. Why has it not supported measures to regulate the use of the dangerous machine so that this danger was reduced to a minimum?.....Instead, when individuals or organisations like the Pedestrians' Association have attempted to take these matters up they have been subject to cheap sneers, notably from the motoring correspondent, and pious humbug deprecating "squabbling about rights".<sup>[70]</sup>

Foley accused the paper of being pro-motorist and anti-pedestrian in its attitudes towards the driving test and speed limit. He felt its motoring correspondent, racing driver Tommy Wisdom, had written 'a continual stream of anti-pedestrian propaganda'.<sup>[71]</sup> Foley said he understood the Herald's desire not to offend the commercial interests who advertised cars, oil and petrol, but suggested they consider their non-motorist readers.

Certainly, the press took a more temperate line when discussing the enormous road casualties that occurred year after year than might have been the case if they were the result of some working-class pastime. Indeed, some coverage was extremely pro-motorist. In October 1933 the motoring correspondent of the *Daily Express* offered a less than consensual perspective when analysing the failures of the 1930 Road Traffic Act. He noted that it had rightly removed the old 20 mph speed limit, which in his opinion had been a farce. However, accidents had risen in the years since it was passed. What was now to be done? he asked. His answer was to compel 'jaywalkers' to take proper care. Many accidents, he believed, could not reasonably be called 'motoring accidents' at all and should be termed 'walking

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<sup>[70]</sup> Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. mss. 292/790.3/2.

<sup>[71]</sup> *ibid.*

accidents'. This line of thought was perhaps most crassly articulated in the *Morris Owner*, in 1932, which argued that:

Legislation has dealt only with the motorist, whereas the foolish pedestrian is almost exclusively to blame, the mental deficient who will not look where he is going when he steps in the road.<sup>[72]</sup>

At the same time a tendency emerged to perceive the majority of motoring offences as inconsequential. In December 1933, an editorial in the *Manchester Evening News* entitled 'Be Fair to the Motorist' labelled the majority of the 330,000 motoring offences as trivial. In the previous year, the *Daily Express* had made what it saw as unnecessary motoring cases part of its general campaign against financial waste. It believed that only 5 per cent of cases could be described as serious.<sup>[73]</sup> In 1937, the *Autocar* commented on changing press attitudes towards the motorist and wondered whether these newspapers had realised that their readers now owned cars themselves. Formerly headlines had spoken of 'Hoot and Kill' motorists: by 1937 they talked instead of 'Fair Play for the Motorist' or 'Suicidal Pedestrians'.<sup>[74]</sup>

In fact, by the late 1930s, the ideas pushed by the NSFA and for many years reiterated by the media may have been widely taken up. A Gallup poll conducted in 1939 suggested that only 5 per cent of people believed that reducing the number of cars would also reduce road accidents. The biggest proportion, 28 per cent, felt that the solution could be found through greater caution and common sense. The poll's findings are reproduced below as Table Five.

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<sup>[72]</sup> *Morris Owner*, October 1932.

<sup>[73]</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 7 December 1933. *Daily Express*, 13 December 1932.

<sup>[74]</sup> *Autocar*, 5 February 1937.

**Table Five**  
**Gallup Poll on Road Safety, 1939<sup>[75]</sup>**

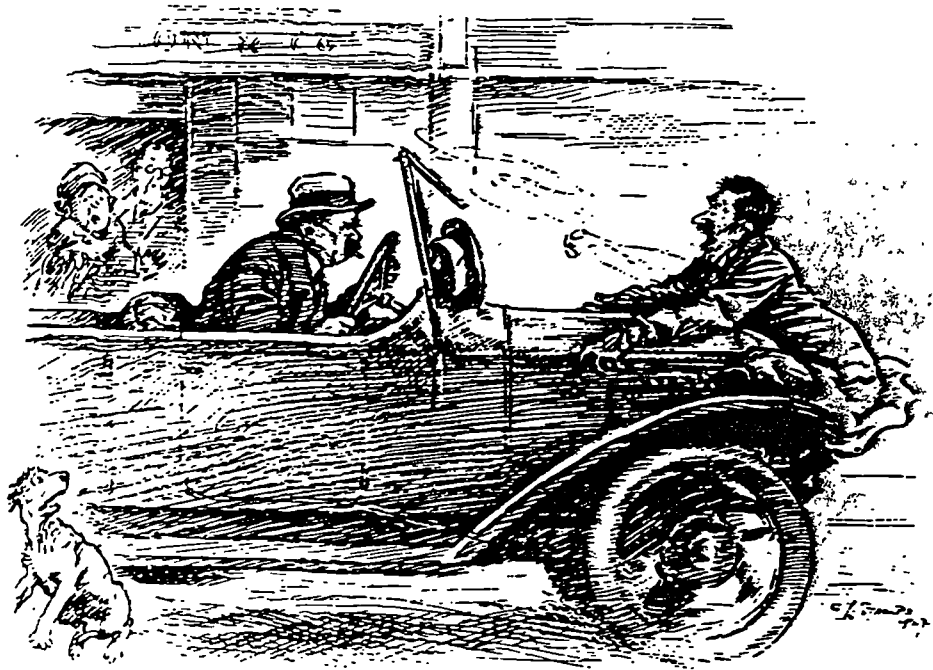
<b>What one thing do you think would help most to reduce road accidents?</b>	
<b>Greater caution/commonsense</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Lower speed limit</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Wider roads/more by-passes</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>More cycle tracks</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Rear lights for bicycles</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Tax cyclists</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Heavier penalties</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Reduce number of cars</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Tax on high powered cars</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Separate roads for fast traffic</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Road crossings</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>More police</b>	<b>3%</b>

There was also a growing tendency for road accidents to be seen in a humorous light. Commenting on the car's impact on California, Ashleigh Brilliant argues that much of the humour surrounding the car involved death and violence. He believes that this served as a release of fear, frustration and guilt, to which it was impossible, or undesirable, to give direct expression. A feeling of powerlessness may have led to a willingness to laugh at the destruction the car could produce.<sup>[76]</sup> In Britain, the pages of *Punch* carried regular cartoons and stories lampooning motoring accidents (See Figure One). In 1935 *You Have Been Warned*, by Fougasse and McCullough, was published with funds from the NSFA. Taking its lead from *Punch*,

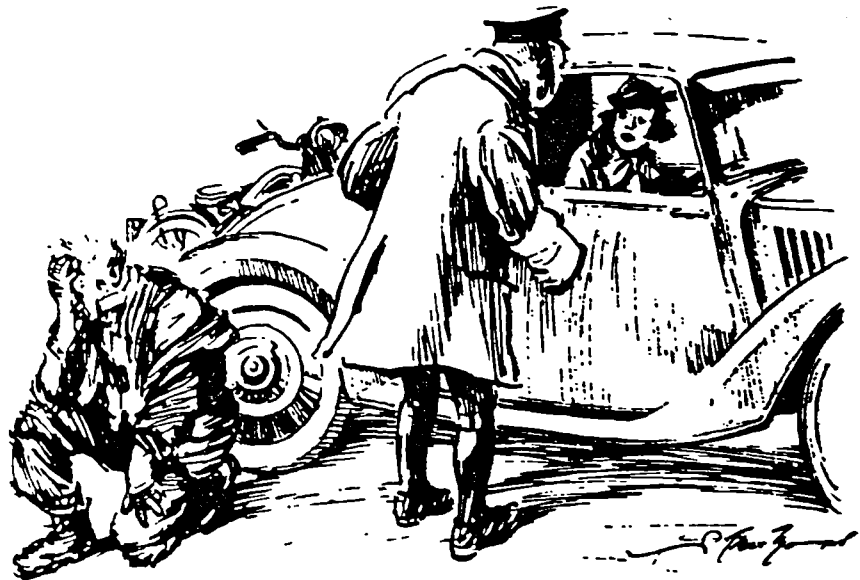
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<sup>[75]</sup> Many thanks to Peter Thompson for this reference.

<sup>[76]</sup> A. Brilliant, *The Great Car Craze: How Southern California Collided with the Automobile in the 1920's*, (Santa Barbara, 1989). p. 97-9.



CHRISTIAN: "D'you know, I don't kill me—I'm on my way—to buy a car—so—I'll soon be on your side!"



'You dragged this man a hundred yards.'  
'But only at thirty miles an hour.'

*Figure One: Source, Classic Motoring From Punch*



it satirised *The Highway Code* and became a best seller, reaching a fifth edition within two months of its launch.<sup>[77]</sup>

If Brilliant is correct, and the humorous treatment of motor accidents was an expression of powerlessness, this is certainly something that was increasingly reflected in government and press pronouncements about road safety. As motor transport became an accepted fact of life, the possibility that society might place restrictions on motoring diminished rapidly as the belief grew that education and planning could eventually all but eliminate road accidents.

The increasing resources expended on prosecuting motorists and the middle-class character of the defendants were a further factor that made the policies offered by the NSFA attractive to many in authority. Motoring misdemeanours brought large numbers of middle-class individuals into conflict with the police for the first time. This development clearly caused a degree of embarrassment to police, courts and motorists. Enforcement of the speed limit, set at 20 mph in 1903, potentially criminalised all motorists whose vehicles were well capable of speeds in excess of a limit which was routinely flouted. Motorists were not averse to using their individual or collective class positions to dissuade the police from employing speed traps. In 1909, when the Surrey police launched a campaign against the AA's use of scouts to warn motorists of speed traps ahead of them, the latter replied by urging its members to launch an economic boycott of the area during the summer months.<sup>[78]</sup> On other

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<sup>[77]</sup> Archives of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents: National Safety First Association file D266/2/29.

<sup>[78]</sup> Emsley, 'The Regulation of Motor Vehicles' p. 370. Economic boycotts were a tactic favoured by the motoring press, not only in attempts to end 'trapping' but also against towns whose police were felt to be over zealous in summoning motorists for obstruction, or where high charges were made for parking. See below for a

occasions, some motorists attempted to intimidate individual police officers, or offered bribes to escape prosecution.<sup>[79]</sup> Another common response was to accuse the police of infringement of liberties. For instance, police speed traps were attacked as un-English and lacking sportsmanship by one MP in 1924.<sup>[80]</sup> The police were also consistently subjected to the claim that they should be protecting property rather than bothering law-abiding motorists. In 1937 one motorist vented his criticism of the police for their failure to solve a number of burglaries in his East Acton street.

Are they short of men? Of course there is a shortage of men, when luxurious mobile police limousines are touring London streets with 3 or sometimes 4 passengers, who might profitably be employed in their proper duty, which I maintain is to protect property.<sup>[81]</sup>

Rising car ownership led to a greater and greater number of motorists coming before the courts. Between 1900 and 1909 only 6.3 per cent of all persons tried for indictable and non-indictable offences faced charges relating to motoring violations. However, in the years from 1930 to 1933 this figure had soared to 43.2 per cent (See Figure Two).

One result of concerns about the antagonism between motorists and police was the emergence in the 1930s of 'courtesy cops', whose role it was to aid and advise motorists rather than censure them. In 1935 the Church Assembly had urged more courtesy on the roads, a sentiment supported by the AA, and in 1937 the first

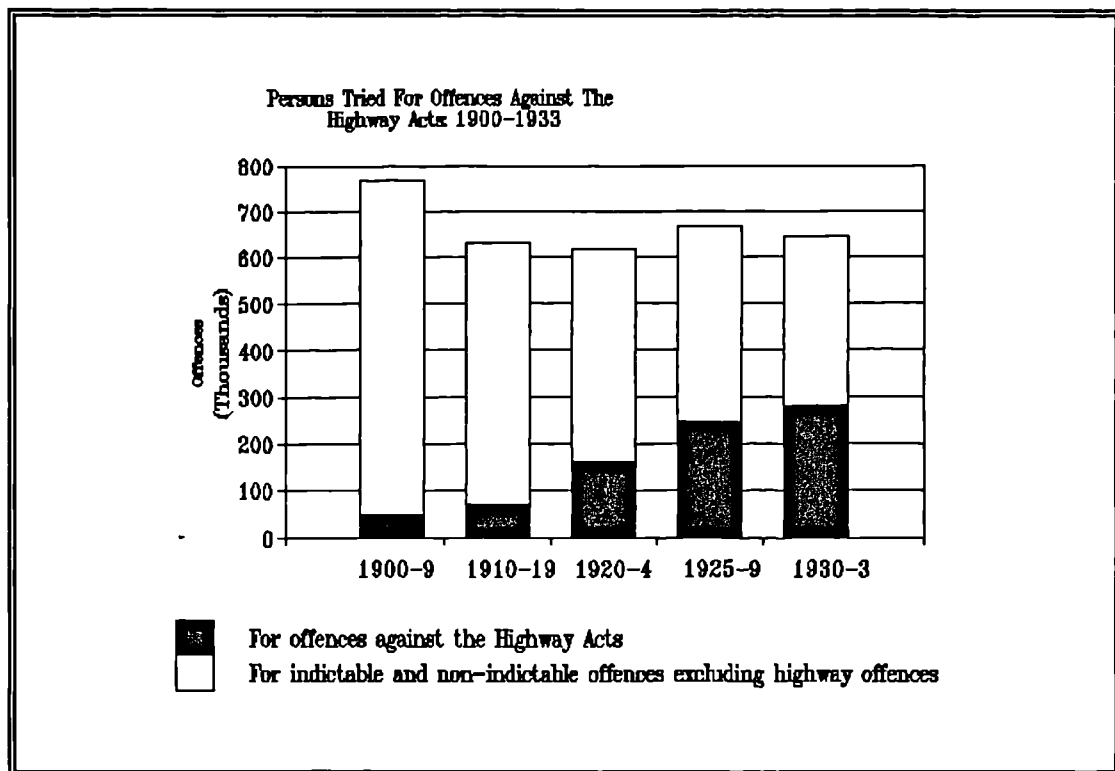
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description of their proposed use in the de-restriction controversy of the 1930s.

<sup>[79]</sup> Emsley, 'The Regulation of Motor Vehicles', pp. 372-3. Klein, 'A New Breed of Law Breaker', pp. 7-8.

<sup>[80]</sup> *Autocar*, 5 June 1924. The AA had been formed in 1905 to frustrate this tactic, employing roads scouts to inform members of the presence of police traps.

<sup>[81]</sup> *Autocar*, 16 April 1937.



**Figure 2** Source: *Criminal Statistics*, 1934

‘courtesy cops’ appeared in government-financed pilot schemes in Lancashire, Cheshire, Liverpool, Manchester and Salford. Officers received special training at Hendon police college, which prepared them to be the educators of motorists rather than prosecutors.<sup>[82]</sup>

Motorists were also receiving increasingly sympathetic treatment in the courts. In his 1935 annual report, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police noted that ‘efforts to enforce the speed limit had not been supported by some of the Courts as well as might have been expected’.<sup>[83]</sup> Growing car ownership amongst magistrates gave them a different perspective on motoring offences. On one occasion, in 1925, Coventry magistrates dismissed cases of motorists caught in a speed trap, their

<sup>[82]</sup> Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 289. *Autocar*, 29 October 1937.

<sup>[83]</sup> Cited in Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 289.

chairman, Major Woollcome-Adams, explaining that the bench disliked this method. He had recently been stopped in a trap and been told he was doing 32 mph when in fact he had been warned of the trap by a fellow motorist and so was only doing 23 mph, itself 3 mph over the official speed limit.<sup>[84]</sup>

Despite the evidence of such cases, motorists felt victimised by both the police and the courts. For some this sense of victimisation could stretch as far as a willingness to defend hit-and-run drivers:

Such reprehensible and cowardly conduct is not characteristic of an Englishman and has forced me to endeavour to find a cause for it...our sense of injustice is very developed, and it is inborn in us to revolt at injustice...motorists run away after causing accidents because they know their case will not be tried free of prejudice and they feel they will not obtain justice.<sup>[85]</sup>

As Table Six suggests motorists were, if anything, securing more lenient treatment from magistrates in the 1920s and 1930s than they had done in 1904/5. Average fines for all motoring offences were 71% lower in real terms in 1938 than in 1904/5. Average fines for speeding on the two dates reveal that the real value of fines was 81% lower in 1938 than in 1904/5. Average fines for dangerous driving fluctuated; being 69% below the 1904/5 level in 1929, but only 11% below the early figure in 1935, before the gap widened again to 27% in 1938. At least some of this variation was due to greater maximum fines for this offence, introduced in the 1930 Road Traffic Act.

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<sup>[84]</sup> *Autocar*, 3 April 1925.

<sup>[85]</sup> *Autocar*, 17 December 1926.

**Table Six**  
**Average fines for motoring offences, 1904-38**

	1904/5	1929	1931	1933	1935	1938
<b>ALL FINES</b>	£2.2	£1	£1	£1.2	£1.1	£1.1
<b>at current</b>	(£2.1)	(£0.6)	(£0.6)	(£0.7)	(£0.7)	(£0.6)
<b>prices and at</b>						
<b>1900 prices</b>						
<b>DANGEROUS</b>	£3.8	£2.4	£3.6	£5	£5.5	£4.9
<b>DRIVING</b>	(£3.7)	(£1.3)	(£2.1)	(3.1)	(£3.3)	(£2.7)
<b>SPEEDING</b>	£3.7	£2.1	-	-	£1.2	£1.3
	(£3.6)	(£1.1)			(£0.7)	(£0.7)

Source: W. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics* (Appendix B). No figures are available for 1906-1928.

There was also an increasing tendency for courts to see even serious motoring offences as technical ones, a proclivity which must have been enhanced by the fact that motoring offenders took up a position in the well of the court not the dock.<sup>[86]</sup> One coroner commenting in 1932 on the death of an eighty-six year old woman in a road accident said: 'Old ladies who go about like this may cause any amount of danger to other people'.<sup>[87]</sup> As concern grew at comments like this and the increasing leniency of many courts, government was prompted to call for more stringent application of the law.

Uncomfortably located between magistrates, who were often ambivalent in their prosecution of motoring offences, and antagonised middle-class motorists, the police began to see the decriminalisation of speeding as one means of reducing the problems they faced. The Chief Constable of Kent, Major Henry Chapman, told the Royal Commission on Transport, which sat between 1928 and 1930, that 37 of 55

<sup>[86]</sup> *Autocar*, 14 May 1937. S. Cooke, *This Motoring*, p. 4.

<sup>[87]</sup> Pedestrians' Association, *Occasional Newsletter*, January 1933. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 272.

Chief Constables favoured ending the speed limit. Appropriately enough, he had himself been prosecuted for a speeding offence, in his chauffeur-driven car.<sup>[88]</sup> The motoring lobby had long been campaigning to have the 20 mph limit removed, arguing that it was archaic, given the technical capabilities of modern motor vehicles. They also maintained that speed was not a significant factor in road accidents, or in the resulting injuries. The problem was increasingly laid at the door of a minority of 'road hogs'. Explaining the rationale behind the abolition of the speed limit in the 1930 Road-Traffic Act Herbert Morrison, the Minister of Transport, placed great importance on the police's view:

[The] police...are in an impossible position. Nominally they have to enforce the law. In fact they know that *the law is not supported by the general body of public opinion, and they tolerate the breaches of the law which now exists*. That is not a fair position in which to place the police. If the law is there, the police should be expected to enforce it, and the police should be given every support and every encouragement. If the public do not expect it enforced, if the general level of opinion is against it being enforced, well the British police have enough common sense not to be too meticulous in enforcing laws which are not in accordance with the general body of public opinion.<sup>[89]</sup>

The 'general body of public opinion', referred to by Morrison, was made up of the motorists themselves, their representative bodies, motor manufacturers, magistrates and the overworked police who obviously increasingly saw virtually all motoring offences as technical in nature and impossible to enforce. Presumably it did not include the victims of road accidents or their relatives.

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<sup>[88]</sup> *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on Transport: Volume One*, 18 April 1928.

<sup>[89]</sup> *Hansard*, Sixth Series, volume 235, col. 1207-8., 10 February 1930 (Italics added).

The determination to decriminalise speeding can be usefully juxtaposed with the decision not to repeal the Street Betting Act of 1906. This act was also widely flouted and magistrates often failed to take tough action against offenders when police brought them to court. Emsley points out that in 1923 a parliamentary committee considered the arguments in favour of its repeal.<sup>[90]</sup> He also correctly suggests that it has not traditionally been popular with legislators to rescind a law because people break it. However, rather than legalise an essentially harmless and massively popular aspect of working-class culture, it was the dangerous middle-class pastime of speeding that was de-criminalised.<sup>[91]</sup> Predictably, the experiment with laissez-faire on the road proved unsuccessful as casualty figures continued to rise. The 1934 Road Traffic Act reimposed a limit, set at 30 mph in built-up areas and introduced driving tests, in spite of the opposition of the AA, RAC and NSFA. However, it also included innovations in the regulation of pedestrian movement by introducing pedestrian crossings. Regulations introduced in London soon after made it possible for pedestrians to be fined for not crossing the road at recognised points.<sup>[92]</sup> In effect the overall result of the two acts was that the motoring lobby had taken two steps forward and one back. The 1934 Act was the final piece of traffic legislation with regard to private motoring in this period. Instead, increasing emphasis was placed on propaganda and the education of all road users. By the late 1930s, the

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<sup>[90]</sup> D. Dixon, *From Prohibition to Regulation: Bookmaking, Anti-gambling and the Law* (Oxford, 1991), p. 258. Cited in Emsley, 'Regulation of Motor Traffic', p. 377.

<sup>[91]</sup> For example, it is estimated that up to seventy per cent of men and fifty per cent of women in some working class districts of Liverpool gambled regularly. A. Davies, 'The police and the people: gambling in Salford, 1900-1939', *Historical Journal*, (1991), pp. 87-115.

<sup>[92]</sup> *Autocar*, 15 June 1934.

government, the police and the media seemed to have accepted that all that could be accomplished in terms of legislation had been realised. Hundreds of thousands of motorists continued to be prosecuted for a variety of offences but casualty figures remained depressingly high. So more and more hopes were pinned on the efforts of teachers, the BBC, the press, and the police in their new guise of courtesy cops to educate all road users. Education, safer vehicles, new road design, and greater segregation of road users were expected to reduce road casualties.

By the end of the 1930s, what Davis identifies as the ideology of road safety had been widely taken up. Where once the press had called for extreme restrictions to be implemented to control the motorist, each new set of frighteningly high accident statistics were met by much hand-wringing and calls for more education and propaganda on road safety. In terms of central government and the national press the road safety lobby had, by the 1930s, largely won the day. The last official words on road safety, in this period, were issued by the Alness Committee, established in 1937 to consider means of reducing road casualties. Its report was criticised by the Pedestrians' Association as 'openly and unreservedly pro-motorist', an assessment recognised by Plowden when citing a key passage from the committee's report.

Propaganda should be employed for the purpose of making those who do not own motor-cars realize how much they owe to motor transport for the supply of their food, for passenger services and so on. There still remains in the public mind a prejudice against motor-cars, born no doubt in the old days when few people owned them, and when they were considered as luxuries rather than part of an essential national service, as they are today.<sup>[93]</sup>

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<sup>[93]</sup>HL 2, 52 (March 1939), para. 31. Cited in Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 290.



The body the committee proposed to carry out this propaganda was, fittingly enough, the NSFA.

### **Road Safety and The City: The Manchester Experience**

In this final section the impact of the increasing use of motor transport on one city, Manchester, will be scrutinised. As society came to a concordance with the private car in particular, a process began of shaping the city to suit the car rather than the reverse. Once again, these events were influenced by the realities of social, economic and political power. It is also worth examining developments at the local level because, unlike central government, local authorities ran their own public transport system which gave them different priorities than national government and could, at times, prompt attempts to develop local responses to increasing motor traffic.

Furthermore, the potential for opposition to the car was more apparent at the local level. This was probably for very practical human reasons. Six or seven thousand road deaths nationally, when experienced year after year, may have become a meaningless figure, whereas a hundred or more road deaths in an individual town inevitably carry more resonance. In smaller areas still there may be a tendency for a greater and greater intensity of feeling. However, it will be seen that on many occasions, when such incidents arose, the arguments of the road lobby held more sway at the Ministry of Transport than those of concerned local residents.

Whenever the local authority in Manchester sought to depart from the general dictates of national policy they faced two problems. Firstly, individual initiatives were generally thwarted by a combination of motoring and commercial interests.

Secondly, a further obstacle was government unwillingness to sanction any action on road safety policy that was not agreed by all parties and implemented nationally. Immediately following the First World War, much popular opinion in Manchester was antagonistic to the car. In September 1919 the Manchester-based *Daily Dispatch* published an editorial entitled 'The Holocaust':

Daily we read of people being run over and smashed. Always we are assured the sinner was going at 12 miles an hour. He never does. There is no rule of the road. The motor car, the taxi car, takes care there shall not be.<sup>[94]</sup>

It called for stricter supervision of drivers, a Manchester speed limit and a regulation that motor vehicles should be required to stop behind trams when passengers were boarding and alighting. This final suggestion caused a great deal of controversy in Manchester in the 1920s. There was widespread concern over the number of pedestrians killed and injured by motor vehicles whilst boarding or alighting from trams. On three separate occasions, between 1921 and 1930, Manchester Corporation Bills included clauses that would force all motorists to pull up behind trams off-loading passengers. A similar bye-law had been in operation in Glasgow since 1914, proving invaluable in reducing road casualties. However, Manchester's bid to introduce such a scheme was resisted at every stage by motoring and commercial interests. In January 1921 a Ratepayers' meeting, attracting only a few hundred citizens, convened to discuss a Corporation Bill and vote on the various clauses.<sup>[95]</sup> The tram-stop clause proved to be a casualty of organised opposition from motorists, the Chamber of Commerce and the Manchester Taxi Cab Owners' Association. The

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<sup>[94]</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, September 6 1919.

<sup>[95]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 20 January 1921.

following month, the corporation organised a plebiscite of its voters, in a bid to rescue the clause and several others. On the eve of the vote, the *Daily News* told its readers that a 'vote for the interests of safety tomorrow is one of the first duties of citizenship'.<sup>[96]</sup> Of the 17,000 citizens that took part in the plebiscite just over 80 per cent voted for the clause, with less than 10 per cent voting against.<sup>[97]</sup> In March the pro-motoring pressure group, the Motor Legislation Committee, issued its response to the council's proposal. It asked the city to drop the clause, as Liverpool's Corporation had been persuaded to do, because it threatened to create a dangerous lack of uniformity in road safety law. It also urged the corporation not to imperil their whole bill 'by persisting in a clause strongly opposed by a large and influential section of their constituents'.<sup>[98]</sup> The corporation's parliamentary committee followed this advice and dropped the clause. This was greeted with indignation in the city, with the *Daily News* accusing the corporation of having 'simply yielded to the representatives of the big motor interests of the country'.<sup>[99]</sup> A full council meeting responded by re-instating the measure following a close vote (39 to 36).<sup>[100]</sup> The next, and final, hurdle proved to be the House of Lords, where a committee of the house, chaired by Lord Wemyss, finally rejected the clause in May.<sup>[101]</sup>

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<sup>[96]</sup> *Daily News*, 31 January 1921.

<sup>[97]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 2 February 1921.

<sup>[98]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 10 March 1921.

<sup>[99]</sup> *Daily News*, 21 March 1921.

<sup>[100]</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 23 March 1921.

<sup>[101]</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 3 May 1921.

In 1924 a similar process came to an end, at the hands of a committee headed by the Earl of Clarendon. The committee heard petitions against the tram-stop clause from the AA, the RAC, the Commercial Motor Users' Association and a group calling itself the Manchester Committee of Road Users. The evidence of Manchester's Chief Constable in favour of the proposal was rejected, as Clarendon's committee followed the Ministry of Transport line that legislation should be of a national, not a local nature. The Manchester press was highly critical of this second rejection of the wishes of the Manchester electorate, who had again shown their support for the measure in a plebiscite.<sup>[102]</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* recalled that much used to be heard of allowing colonial administrations to get on with handling their own problems, but in contemporary Manchester 'the majority is not master of its own house, and our overlord seems singularly studious of the minority's interests'.<sup>[103]</sup> The *City News* went further, describing, in an article entitled 'Who governs Manchester?', the victory of sectional interests:

In other words the minority has the right to rule and not the majority of citizens. Perhaps no other decision could be looked for from a body which represents nobody but itself. The traditional upholders of privilege have once more demonstrated their faith in themselves.<sup>[104]</sup>

The council planned another attempt to implement their safety proposal in 1930 but withdrew it following the publication of the government's road traffic bill. The bill included provision for *The Highway Code*, which was to include a suggestion that drivers halt when trams were off-loading passengers. When the local branch of

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<sup>[102]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 21 May 1924.

<sup>[103]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[104]</sup> *The City News*, 22 May 1924.

the Pedestrians' Association asked to see the Lord Mayor to protest about the decision, they were told that there would be no point in having the meeting.

In Manchester, as nationally, a tendency was emerging to focus on the responsibility of pedestrians for road accidents. In October 1929, the Chief Constable of Salford, Godfrey, appeared on radio to state his opinion that in some motor-vehicle-related fatalities the inquest should return a verdict of suicide by the pedestrian.<sup>[105]</sup> By November 1933 he was describing the pedestrian as the most unrestricted individual in the country.<sup>[106]</sup> The following month he was championing his force's use of road safety lectures in schools, describing how children were

taught how their careless actions reflect on the characters of the schools, of their homes, on their city and country: that they are not justified in causing so much mental anguish to others by being careless on the streets.<sup>[107]</sup>

An uncharitable critic might conclude that Godfrey maintained a high profile for his force in road safety matters because his force had been tarnished with allegations of corruption involving illegal gambling.<sup>[108]</sup>

Also in 1933, Godfrey's Manchester equivalent, Maxwell, attributed almost 58 per cent of fatal accidents in the city to pedestrian carelessness.<sup>[109]</sup> A year earlier the Manchester city coroner, Mr Surridge, had also been reported to be

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<sup>[105]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1929.

<sup>[106]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1929. *City News*, 25 November 1933.

<sup>[107]</sup> *Autocar*, 8 December 1933.

<sup>[108]</sup> Davies, 'The police and the people', p. 95. For discussion of scandals in 1932 and 1936.

<sup>[109]</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 31 March 1933.

attributing most of the road fatalities in the city to the same cause.<sup>[110]</sup> Manchester was by this time fully in step with national policy. Thousands of children went annually to see road safety films and the city had an annual safety week. Meanwhile Manchester Police's motorised section insisted that they be seen as friends and advisers of the motorist, rather than as a primarily punitive body. The Chief Constable's annual reports pointed to any reduction in the number of road deaths as evidence of the success of road safety education. These claims were often misplaced, as road casualties remained high (See Table Seven).

In 1935 the city once more sought to take unilateral action to restrict motor traffic in attempting to defy government orders to derestrict twenty-eight roads. Derestriction was the process of removing the speed limit imposed by the 1934 Road Traffic Act from roads where motorists or commercial interests felt it unwarranted. However, by this time, the motives behind Manchester's challenge to Ministry of Transport directives were perhaps debatable. It seems likely that the financial costs, as much as the possible human consequences, of derestricting several city roads were uppermost in council thinking. Derestricting several roads would have necessitated the erection of speed limit signs at points where motorists returned to restricted sections of the city's highways.

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<sup>[110]</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 2 January 1932.

**Table Seven**  
**Manchester Road Casualties 1922-1939**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Killed</b>	<b>Injured</b>
<b>1922</b>	57	1,296
<b>1923</b>	48	1,386
<b>1924</b>	68	1,655
<b>1925</b>	59	1,727
<b>1926</b>	76	2,199
<b>1927</b>	73	2,874
<b>1928</b>	75	3,193
<b>1929</b>	83	3,445
<b>1930</b>	117	3,454
<b>1931</b>	88	3,760
<b>1932</b>	112	3,473
<b>1933</b>	91	3,508
<b>1934</b>	94	2,922
<b>1935</b>	82	2,651
<b>1936</b>	85	4,194
<b>1937</b>	87	4,447
<b>1938</b>	83	4,342
<b>1939</b>	147	4,670
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,527</b>	<b>55,193</b>

Source: City of Manchester Watch Committee, *Statistical Returns of the Police, Fire Brigade and Weights and Measures Departments*.

Manchester, and other councils, complained to central government about the extra costs this would entail. Manchester claimed that if all its roads were subject to the limit, road-signs would cost only £1,500, but if several arterial roads were to be exempted costs could rise to £30,000. The city, along with several others, defied Ministry of Transport dictates to derestrict the roads in question. A public enquiry

was held in October, with the council, the Pedestrians' Association and the Manchester and Salford Trades Council opposing the derestriction orders. Supporting the Ministry's decision were the AA, RAC and a group calling itself the Society of United Motorists. The latter groups won the day, 24 of the 28 roads were derestricted by the Ministry. Mr A. A. Purcell, the secretary of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, was highly critical of the process.

Of all the travesties and mockeries of an enquiry I never saw one to equal that, Manchester Corporation is the governing body in the city, and yet the AA and the RAC put Manchester Corporation in the box and then examined it.<sup>[111]</sup>

In other parts of Britain local residents' groups took part in spontaneous derestriction revolts which were the result of passionate views about the dangers of traffic, the car in particular. Such was the case in four areas of London in the late 1930s. Residents near Falloden Way (Hampstead), West Way (Shepherds Bush), The North Circular Road (Willesden) and Western Avenue (East Acton) found themselves living alongside roads that had been derestricted. They responded by organising demonstrations that halted traffic, much to the fury of passing motorists. The first two of these protests were successful in their aim of reimposing the 30 mph limit. Also in 1937, mothers living near the Kingstanding Road, in Birmingham's Perry Bar area, protested about the dangers their children faced from speeding motor traffic. The following year, mothers living near the Kingston by-pass at Tolworth in Surrey, engaged in protests which held up traffic. Fifty police were needed to clear them

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<sup>[111]</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 19 December 1935.



away.<sup>[112]</sup> Elsewhere, parents protested against the dangers of road traffic by keeping their children away from school.<sup>[113]</sup>

One demonstration, in 1937, by residents living in a Hammersmith council estate alongside West Way, culminated in violent clashes with the police.<sup>[114]</sup> Locals complained that cars travelled at very high speeds along the road and failed to stop at pedestrian crossings. The *Acton Gazette and Express* supported their case:

On Tuesday evening the cars were flashing along Westway at very high speeds, and groups of children stood at the pedestrian crossings waiting for a chance to dart across the road. A "Gazette" reporter who spent about an hour walking up and down Westway did not see one car stop at any of the crossings.<sup>[115]</sup>

Many motorists resented the reimposition of the 30 mph limit on new arterial roads. They felt that since their motoring taxes had paid for the roads subsequent ribbon development should not entail an end to their freedom to travel at speed along the new highways. As the *Autocar* put it:

Every time it is the motorist who pays out vast sums to find a way of avoiding all danger to children and pedestrians, and every time these pedestrians settle down like a swarm of bees around the amenities which he, the motorist has provided - and then complain of the danger!<sup>[116]</sup>

The *Autocar* called for commercial boycotts of shops and businesses in areas that refused to derestrict the roads in question.<sup>[117]</sup> It felt that the speed limit had a

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<sup>[112]</sup> *The Times*, 29 August 1938.

<sup>[113]</sup> Dean, *Murder Most Foul*, p. 89.

<sup>[114]</sup> *Autocar*, 5 February 1937.

<sup>[115]</sup> *Acton Gazette and Express*, 15 January 1937.

<sup>[116]</sup> *Autocar*, 22 January 1937.

<sup>[117]</sup> *Autocar*, 29 March 1937.

‘magic power ... in the minds of local authorities’. In the case of West Way, it noted that the Ministry of Transport had offered Hammersmith borough council grants towards the cost of guard rails, subways and overhead bridges for pedestrians.<sup>[118]</sup> Clearly, as far as the motoring community was concerned, the following years would see the car altering the urban landscape rather than the other way around.

## Conclusion

In his 1942 book *Town Planning and Road Traffic*, Alker Tripp argued that ‘any town so planned that its citizens are killed and injured in vast numbers is obviously an ill-planned town’.<sup>[119]</sup> This statement brings us to the crux of the matter for it asks questions of how cities were planned, but says nothing about the form of transport which bought the ‘vast numbers’ of deaths and injuries to those cities. There is no single British example as striking as that of Robert Moses’ planning of New York, to demonstrate what the infrastructure around a technology can reveal about the embodiment of specific forms of power and authority - although perhaps the abolition of the speed limit in 1930 comes close. However, a similar embodiment of class interest was a very significant feature of the emergence of motoring legislation, road safety policies and eventually the design of Britain’s towns and cities. In the case of Manchester and other British cities, attempts to restrict the growing hegemony of motor transport were blocked by a powerful ideology and powerful interests. Once

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<sup>[118]</sup> *Autocar*, 5 February 1937.

<sup>[119]</sup> H. Alker Tripp, *Town Planning and Road Traffic* (1942), p. 16.

car ownership began diffusing amongst the influential professional and commercial middle classes there was little chance that an effective opposition to private motoring might arise. The newspapers that these groups read also began changing their attitudes towards the car. These developments made it possible for motoring interests to employ a language of *laissez-faire* and 'Englishness' in urging minimal government interference with the motorist. With motoring offering new freedom to many in the middle classes, large numbers of jobs for working people and increasing financial revenue for the government, it became convenient for all concerned to place their hope in the claims being made by the emerging 'science' of road safety. So, a belief that education and propaganda, better roads and safer technology were better alternatives than legislation made mass car-ownership a palatable option, salving anxieties about the deaths and injuries that continued unabated on the roads. In the process, many of the assumptions made and decisions taken reflected the realities of the distribution of power in a class society. Speaking against the re-imposition of the speed limit, in 1934, Lieut-Col Moore Brabazon MP, later to become Minister of Transport, unconsciously revealed the chilling class assumptions that lay at the root of the ideology of road safety.

It is true that 7,000 people are killed in motor accidents, but it is not always going on like that. People are getting used to the new conditions...No doubt many of the old Members of the House will recollect the number of chickens we killed in the old days. We used to come back with the radiator stuffed with feathers. It was the same with dogs. Dogs get out of the way of motor cars nowadays and you never kill one. There is education even in the lower animals. These things will right themselves.<sup>[120]</sup>

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<sup>[120]</sup>*Hansard*, Fifth Series, vol. 288, 10 April 1934. Moore-Brabazon was Minister of Transport in 1940-1 and had been Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Transport in 1923-4 and 1924-7.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Old England by Car: Dealing with a Contradiction**

## Introduction

Although much of the criticism levelled at the car was a result of its threat to human life, there was also controversy over its impact on the countryside. This chapter examines the factors behind this development. At its heart is the conflict between images of the countryside held by middle-class motorists and the economic realities faced by those who lived there. Car ownership allowed many in the middle classes to indulge their fantasies about rural life, whether by visiting the countryside regularly or by establishing a new home there. However, there was a contradiction inherent in this development; for although the car enabled them to enjoy rest and solitude in rural surrounds it was also increasingly identified as a major factor in the despoliation of the countryside.

However, the negative portrayal of the car's role in the countryside, did not acknowledge the full complexity of the impact of increasing motor traffic. Rising car ownership had a positive side for many in the countryside. The second half of the chapter will examine the economic opportunities middle-class motorists could offer rural entrepreneurs, whilst also advancing an assessment of the changes cars brought to rural owners.

The chapter begins with an examination of the interest in rural life that was a growing feature of British society at this time. The role that the car came to have in this process is then explained, as are reactions to these developments from motorists and anti-motorists. An attempt will then be made to discover the reaction to the car from within rural communities. It will become apparent that the anti-car

feelings of rural preservationists were not always mirrored by those who worked and lived in rural Britain. At times the intrusion of motorists and other urbanites caused annoyance, this was particularly true in the earlier part of the period. However, attitudes towards the car in rural Britain seem to have softened as greater use was made of cars by members of rural communities and as increasing motor traffic offered financial opportunities to rural entrepreneurs. As part of this investigation it will prove valuable to analyse each of the areas in which the car came under attack by preservationists.

### **Rural England: Image and Reality**

Several historians have identified the growth in interest in the rural traditions and landscape of Britain that emerged from at least the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>[1]</sup> Although the nation had become predominantly industrial the ideology of 'Englishness' remained to a remarkable degree rural. Rural life fascinated writers,

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<sup>[1]</sup> Contemporaries used the phrase English landscape most often, although this at times included Wales, Scotland and Ireland.  
Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

artists, politicians and the public.<sup>[2]</sup> This interest reached its zenith in the interwar years in the movement to the great outdoors.<sup>[3]</sup>

This idealisation of rural society has several important implications for this study. Firstly, the image of country life which was most commonly portrayed was a romantic and conservative one. It was frequently represented as the quintessential form of English society, whose hallmarks were simple living, commonsense values, tradition; a realm where status was 'prescribed by a well defined hierarchy'.<sup>[4]</sup> It was, as several commentators have remarked, a perspective on rural society that was class-specific, offering a vision of an ordered society which managed to be reassuringly hierarchical and yet almost classless.<sup>[5]</sup> Secondly, the defining and valued qualities of the English landscape was predominantly identified with the southern counties of England, the so-called 'south country'. Features judged to be attractive included half-timbering, village greens and hedgerows which were characteristic attributes of 'the country south of the Thames and Severn and East of Exmoor...the counties of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire,

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[2] G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971). A. Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in R. Colls and P. Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (1986), p. 63. M. Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (1994), p. 53. M. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (St Ives, 1992). S. Miller, 'Land, Landscape and the Question of Culture: English Urban Hegemony and Research Needs', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 8 (1995), pp. 94-107.

[3] Howkin, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 63. A. Potts, '"Constable Country" Between the Wars, in R. Samuel (ed), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Volume III* (Guernsey, 1989), p.165.

[4] C.E.M. Joad, *The Horrors of the Countryside* (1931), pp. 18-19.

[5] Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England'. Williams, *The Country and the City*.

Dorset and part of Somerset'.<sup>[6]</sup> A third feature of the interest in rural England follows the second. The interest taken in certain physical architectural and topographical features resulted in their being aestheticised. Increasingly it was the landscape and scenery of the English countryside which were held to be the repository of essential English values. The interwar period, in particular, saw the countryside depicted as an enjoyable object of urban consumption.

A growing literature catered for these tastes. *Country Life*, for example, first appeared in 1887, becoming an immediate success<sup>[7]</sup> and by 1904 newspapers, such as the *Manchester Guardian* with its essentially liberal and urban readership, were including a 'Country Diary' in their contents.<sup>[8]</sup> Literary, artistic and journalistic images of the countryside often omitted any trace of the real economic and social life of country people. They addressed a desire for an intensely personal 'away from it all' immersion in the beauties of an unspoiled scenic landscape. This was a form of middle-class tourism that defined itself in opposition to the vulgarity of the popular seaside resort, valuing the romantic rather than the collective gaze.<sup>[9]</sup>

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<sup>[6]</sup> E. Thomas *The South Country*, cited in Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', p. 64.

<sup>[7]</sup> Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, p. 82.

<sup>[8]</sup> M. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (St Ives, 1992), chapter 4 footnote 36.

<sup>[9]</sup> The terms are those used by John Urry who argues that the cultural practices of tourism are constituted by a set of preferred social activities which are highly structured by distinctions of taste. Thus, 'people want to be in certain places, gazing at particular objects, in the company of specific other types of people.' Urry associates what he calls the 'romantic gaze' with scenery, being on your own, and the middle class, as against the 'collective gaze', a classic example of which would be the working class seaside holiday. J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), p. 66.



Prompted by the success of H.V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1927), which had gone through twelve editions by 1936, a number of publishers introduced series designed to exploit the interest in tradition and scenery.<sup>[10]</sup> The dominant sentiment and theme in this genre can be illustrated by the example of Hutchinson's 1939 pocket guide to *Kent, Surrey and Sussex*. Readers were informed that it was in the 'splendour of our old domestic architecture' and 'country gardens' that the 'charm of England' was to be found. In 'renewing contact with the countryside' the townsman was 'only two generations from 'the completely rural life of his forbears'.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, the enthusiasm for and content of country magazines, guide books and rural novels ensured that their largely middle-class readership was well informed of only selected aspects of country life. It was relatively simple to become an expert in the aesthetic qualities of the English landscape and vernacular architecture, or about the history and traditions of rural life, but the economic situation of British agriculture and its employees was very much less known.

From the late nineteenth century preservationists were motivated by similar preoccupations. Their interests lay predominantly in preserving buildings, scenery and landscape rather than investigating or intervening in the economic and social issues central to the lives of rural inhabitants. From the late nineteenth century a number of conservationist groups emerged with a variety of objectives.<sup>[12]</sup> Pressure

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[10] In 1929 Longmans began their 'English Heritage' series which included titles on folk song and dance, and the parish church. The following year Batsford began an 'English Life' series which featured illustrated volumes on villages and hamlets. Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, p. 53.

[11] W.S. Shears (ed), *Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (1939), pp. 9-11.

[12] The first of these was The Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society formed by William Morris in the 1860s. It was followed by The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877), SCAPA or The Society for Checking the Abuses of Advertising (1893) and the National Trust (1894).

groups grew in number throughout the interwar years as the countryside was encroached upon either for leisure or new suburban or rural housing. In 1926 the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) was founded with broad-based support. It was to be the most active conservationist grouping in this period, its archives attesting to its involvement in a variety of issues, from the aesthetics of country garages to the problems of litter. Other societies campaigned on single issues; for example, The Roads Beautifying Association, formed in 1928, published guidelines on planting trees along arterial and trunk roads in country areas. The lobbying efforts of the CPRE and others ensured that central government was also increasingly involved, legislating on numerous occasions in the interests of rural preservation. Legislation containing measures to protect the countryside included the National Trust Act (1907), the Roads Improvement Act (1925), the Petroleum (Consolidation) Act (1928), the Town and Country Planning Act (1932), and the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act (1935). However, as was the case with the growing literature on life in the countryside, these initiatives did little to address the problems of those who relied on it for their livelihood. A brief review of the economic situation in rural Britain reveals that developments there ensured that the interests of many in the countryside were often at odds with the more romantic notions of urban Britain.

One of the most significant trends in rural Britain in the early decades of this century was the continuing break-up of landed estates due, most frequently, to the

growing burden of death duties. The reverse side of this process saw the proportion of owner-occupied farmland rise from 11 per cent in 1913 to 20 per cent in 1921 and 36 per cent by 1927, representing the largest change in land ownership since the sixteenth century sale of monastic lands.<sup>[13]</sup> Between 1918 and 1922 25 per cent of the land surface of Britain changed hands.<sup>[14]</sup> Many great estates were broken up, engendering a significant shift in the class structure of rural society. The old landed elites left the scene to be replaced by a new breed of owner-occupying commercial farmers. The transfer of ownership left the new commercial farmers heavily mortgaged and vulnerable to the fall in agricultural prices that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time the decline of craft industries increased the rural populations' reliance on agriculture to a dangerous extent. The interwar rural economy has been likened to that of a one-industry town and certainly economic and social decline were continual features of the scene at that time.<sup>[15]</sup> The comparatively lower living standards in the countryside encouraged rural-urban migration, particularly amongst young adults. This trend was reflected in a fall of 27 per cent in numbers employed in agricultural production between 1921-4 and 1938.<sup>[16]</sup>

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[13] As Sheail *Rural Conservation in Interwar Britain* (Oxford, 1981) p. 21. As we shall see, in these circumstances there were many in the countryside

[14] H. Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural Britain* (1987) p. 152, who had reason to welcome aspects of urban encroachment. The interest shown in

[15] Sheail, *Rural Conservation in Interwar Britain*, p. 22.

[16] An average of 816,000 worked in agriculture in 1921-4, but only 593,000 were employed in 1938.

the countryside by the increasingly mobile, comparatively wealthy urban middle-classes combined with the depressed state of the rural economy to produce a plethora of developments that were to leave the preservationist movement constantly agitated. As Denis Cosgrove has observed, an uneasy tension prevailed between scenic values and unrestricted production for exchange within the rural sphere.<sup>[17]</sup> The high cultural value placed on the consumption of an almost imaginary traditional rural world encouraged the continual encroachment of modernity into that environment. The car's role in this process was central, both symbolically and materially. Its position as transport for the individual family made it the perfect facilitator of the intensely personal 'away from it all' immersion in the beauties of the countryside. Yet, at the same time, the arrival of large numbers of motorists in rural Britain threatened to destroy traditional life there.

### **The Car and the Countryside: The Motorist's Perspective**

The pages of motoring magazines, novels and guides from the 1920s and 1930s were for the most part written in a Mortonian spirit.<sup>[18]</sup> The pages of the *Autocar*, the *Motor*, numerous one-marque magazines and various guides were formulaic. Their pages were filled with reports of journeys through rural idylls, stories of the simplicity of country living, rural legends, and hurried visits to historic sights,

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<sup>[17]</sup> D.E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), pp. 264-5.

<sup>[18]</sup> V. Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), p. 228. The phrase is borrowed from Cunningham's assessment of the impact of H. V. Morton's work.

churches and castles punctuated only by halts at quaint tea shops.<sup>[19]</sup> Once again, there was minimal discussion of the people of rural Britain. So, much of the motoring equivalent of the general countryside literature followed a familiar pattern, but the voyeur's mode of travel - the car - created a sense of irony in the relationship between motorist and countryside.

In 1929 John Prioleau produced the first edition of *Car and Country: Week-End Signposts to the Open Road*.<sup>[20]</sup> It offered a series of recommended drives around the scenic highways and byways of England and Wales. Its contents page revealed a series of familiar preoccupations. Selections on offer included details of 'hidden villages', Kiplingesque references to 'Puck and his rewards and fairies', romantic sorties into 'Robin Hood's country', and advice on 'the industrial patch and how to avoid it'.<sup>[21]</sup> As with other literature of its type there was sparse reference to countryside inhabitants, although, Prioleau reminded readers that Sunday was a bad day to get 'farm help to pull you out of [snow] drifts into which you may have incautiously sunk'.<sup>[22]</sup> This patronising attitude towards rural inhabitants resurfaced in a description of Wells in Norfolk:

You will like Wells and the country round it, not less because its village green, which is an excellent example of the type, is probably the only one in England which boasts a bandstand. Yet that bandstand

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[19] See, for example, *Austin Magazine*, *Modern Motoring* (published by the Rootes Group), *Morris Owner*, *Standard Car Review* and *Popular Motoring* (The official organ of the Singer Motor Car Club).

[20] J. Prioleau *Car and Country: Week-End Signposts to the Open Road* (1929). Prioleau had formerly been Sales Manager at Morris Motors. Many of the short pieces collected in this book had previously appeared in *The Observer*.

[21] *ibid.*, p. 155.

[22] *ibid.* p. 40.

is of an unassuming and rustic kind, and I feel sure that the tunes which are played in it, if any, are gratifyingly unsophisticated.<sup>[23]</sup>

If what little of country life that appears is reassuring and obliging, so too is the landscape depicted which is made the epitome of unassuming, yet majestic, 'Englishness'. Of Horsell Common in Surrey, Prioleau wrote: 'It is a tiny common, but like so many of its kind in England, manages to put on an air of immense size'.<sup>[24]</sup> The *Shell Guides* which have come to hold a significant place in the heritage canon also emanate from this period. The first, by John Betjeman on Cornwall, was published in 1934 and set the tone for what was to follow, which has been colourfully described as 'aggressively and squirearchically up-market and blood-sporting Anglican'.<sup>[25]</sup>

Although much of the motoring literature was structured along tried and tested lines the modernity of the car created tensions which produced a number of interpretations of its role in the countryside. One way was to do what Prioleau, the Shell writers and many others did and simply ignore the issue. Many motoring writers evaded the question of the changes the car would inevitably bring to their image of stable, traditional, rural society. Another response was also one made by Shell in skilfully exploiting the tension between motoring and rural preservation. The company's advertising made use of pre-existing concepts of the countryside as utopian world holding residues of history. Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright's discussion of this process is an interesting one, although they appear to overestimate the

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[23] *ibid.*, p. 189.

[24] *ibid.*, p. 9.

[25] V. Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), p. 228.

originality of Shell's strategy.<sup>[26]</sup> From 1923 the company began removing its advertisements from rural locations, replacing them with a celebrated series of 'lorry bills' by artists such as McKnight Kauffer, Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and Ben Nicholson.<sup>[27]</sup> Their work placed the car centrally in 'natural' or 'historic' scenes which were depicted in a striking modernist style. The countryside was thus caught up in a tensed movement between a traditionalist display of nature, conditioned by the cyclical time of the seasons, and a stylized celebration of the machine, with the car representing the irreversible progress of time.<sup>[28]</sup> The results of this work were often arrestingly attractive and reassuring. Figure One is a 1929 Morris advertisement from *Punch* which is clearly indebted to the Shell series. In this example the use of colour is particularly effective, incorporating the foregrounded motorist and his car with the country scene.

As the 1930s drew on the car lost its central position within Shell's advertising. The decade witnessed increasing car ownership and country motoring: consequently the concerns of preservationists grew. In this period a third response to the problem of reconciling car and countryside seems to have been the most commonly expressed. Mirroring the debate over road safety, it acknowledged the damage increased motoring could cause in the countryside, before closing the discussion with reassurances about the advantages of the car. In 1938 Rupert Croft Cooke's *How to Get More Out of Life* noted that motoring had been fun but it was

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[26] M. Bommes and P. Wright, 'Charms Of Residence: The Public and the Past' in R. Johnson (ed), *Making Histories*, (1982).

[27] *ibid.*, p. 285.

[28] *ibid.*, p. 285.

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[28] *ibid.*, p. 285.



becoming apparent that the fun had to be paid for 'by a blotched landscape and a beastly noise'.<sup>1</sup> However, motoring had 'changed England from a garden to a park', from the train it was only possible to gaze at the countryside, in the car the motoring family becomes part of it.<sup>2</sup> In 1937 the *Autocar* reacted to claims that farm labourers were finding it difficult to find affordable accommodation because of the growing number of car-owning families buying up old cottages. In a less than sympathetic response it suggested that the phenomenon had been exaggerated and that in any case it meant that old buildings were being renovated. Furthermore, it argued, people who normally lived in smoggy cities were benefitting from country air.<sup>3</sup>

W. R. Calvert's novel *Family Holiday* (1932) provides the best literary example of the motoring community reconciling itself to the contradiction between the modernity of their transport and their quest for a romantic old England. The novel described a motoring holiday through idyllic and historical England and Wales. The family's car facilitates travel from one historic church to another, from village to village, enabling them to travel off the beaten track to stay in an idealised farm house rather than a hotel. Their idyll is described in suitably flowery prose: 'In time they climbed again that winding, wooden stairway. They leant through wide-flung casements and listened to the tuneful silence of the night and breathed the mellow, scented garden breath. And so to sleep'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Croft Cooke, *How to Get More Out of Life* (1938), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> *Autocar*, 1 October 1937.

<sup>4</sup> Calvert, *Family Holiday*, p. 51.



You get More out of Life with a  
**MORRIS**  
MORRIS MOTORS (1927) LTD. COWLEY, OXFORD.

BUY BRITISH AND



BE PROUD OF IT

However, there was a price to be paid for the access to rural beauty offered by the car. Finding themselves overlooking a beauty spot, the protagonists of *Family Holiday* are jolted from their musings by evidence of the modern world:

There is a wonderful feeling at such viewpoints; a strange indefinable sensation engendered by the sea of greenery down below, steadfast yet ever moving, seeming solid yet known to be well-nigh as insubstantial as a dream. It was the Baron [their pet-name for their son] who brought them back down to earth and made them conscious of the inevitable orange peel, cigarette cartons and other litter always to be found in beauty spots.<sup>5</sup>

They are also disillusioned by the unsightly corrugated iron shacks selling sweets, postcards, pottery and illustrated books to motorists visiting Devil's Bridge in Wales. This is one example of a tourist industry making itself felt in rural areas by catering for an increasingly mobile urban society. By the end of this particular novel the author/protagonist is beginning to come to terms with this commodification of the countryside. He hopes that tourism may rekindle interest in local customs and dress thereby ensuring their survival in an increasingly uniform world. Thus, although the one person to be seen in Welsh national costume is dressed in that fashion only to facilitate the sale of post cards to motorised tourists he welcomes this.

How charming it looked against the natural background of trees in all their vernal freshness. What matter that it was worn purely for a mercenary purpose - for the more certain sale of picture post cards? It was a gleam of colour, a breath from the romantic past...Let the mercenary value of this costume-play be stressed, if need be, so that there be a renaissance in such matters. The kilt in the Highlands, the red hood in Wales, yes and the shawl and clogs in Lancashire with the smock in Sussex. We should bring them back by every means in our power. Why should they disappear? Why should uniformity spread its drab hand over every place and person so that we may no longer distinguish a Welsh maiden from a Tooting typist?... Yes, let the Welsh girls wear their national costume again, if only for the sake of selling picture post cards, and cigarettes, and tickets of admission to

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

Nature's beauty-spots. They little realise how travellers long to see it in its lovely setting.<sup>6</sup>

There is of course tremendous irony in this plea. Here was a motorised member of the modern world who wished to holiday in a rural Britain which existed more in folklore than reality. This was a rural Britain, to be consumed by wealthier members of urban society, whose ideal inhabitants were picturesque remainders of a romantic and simple past. However, the car took middle-class motorists on a nostalgia trip during which they found their image of rural life jarred by the realities of the modern world. The car, and motor transport more generally, was followed into the country by garages, roadside advertising, ribbon development, and road traffic accidents.

**'Beauty sacrificed on the altar of the speeding motorist'. Preservationist Responses to the Car.**

Other voices, from outside the motoring world, also commented on the commercialisation of the rural environment that the car encouraged. They proved to be far more critical of that encroachment than the narrative voice of Calvert's *Family holiday*. The motor car was subjected to a barrage of invective by a group of self-appointed defenders of the countryside with the *Garage and Motor Agent* complaining at one point about anti-motorist 'highbrows' at the BBC continually attributing the despoliation of the countryside to cars and garages.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the middle-brow ambitions and lifestyles of the average middle classes were often the subject of

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> *Garage and Motor Agent*, 22 February 1936.

vitriolic attack by an unusual coalition of intellectual and social elites. Stephen Spender, for example, described the incursion into rural Britain as '*laissez faire* run mad, a huge inflation of Tudor villas on arterial roads, wireless sets, tin cars, golf clubs - the paradise of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>8</sup> However, it was the philosopher C.E.M. Joad who proved to be the most consistent campaigner against the car in the countryside.

His most detailed assault appeared in *The Horrors of the Countryside* in 1931. In a passage littered with colourful language he denigrated the activities of the motoring classes who had disrupted his relaxing country walks:

Suddenly I become aware of a noise; it is an irritable noise like the buzzing of a swarm of angry bees, but more explosive and less regular; it is more as though a regiment of soldiers had begun to suffer simultaneously from flatulence or a herd of swine to belch in ragged unison. The noise is accompanied by a smell, a smell of oil and petrol...Presently I... come into full view of a main road. The road is covered with cars. Bonnet to tail they stretch continuously in an unending procession. From time to time the cars break wind in one another's faces....The faces of the motorists are strained and angry; upon them is an air of tense expectancy, and in the intervals between their spasmodic bursts of activity they glower at one another. From the country they are completely cut off; they cannot see its sights, hear its sounds, smell its smells, or enjoy its silence. They are hemmed in by other motorists, and even if they were alone, they are in no frame of mind for aesthetic enjoyment. The pool cannot reflect the sky when it is troubled, and these motorists are very troubled, for they are trying to pass each other.. (their horn blowing is)..like a pack of fiends released from the nethermost pit.. it spread for nearly a mile on each side of the road. And, wherever there is a main road in England to-day, there over an area two miles wide along the whole length of the road the peace of the countryside is shattered.

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<sup>8</sup> S. Spender, *Forward from Liberalism* (1937). Cited in Cunningham *British Writers of the Thirties*, p. 257.

That is how the motoring classes enjoy a summer's evening in the country. And the habits of the motoring classes constitute an ideal of 'enjoyment' for nine Englishmen out of ten.<sup>9</sup>

This Swiftian language is one that is employed frequently in the literature of rural preservation. Those writers who appeared in Clough Williams-Ellis's *Britain and the Beast* (1937) certainly found no problem in conjuring up a plethora of pollution metaphors to press home their point about rural despoliation. Each contributor was commissioned to reveal the levels of damage to the countryside in a particular area of Britain. Sheila Kaye-Smith, herself the author of romantic novels of Sussex country life, believed that the car brought increased problems to the countryside of Kent and Sussex because it offered 'a coast within reach of a London car-ride, and the car, unlike the train, does not clot its horrors at the journey's end but smears them along the way'.<sup>10</sup>

Other contributors identified a recently departed halcyon age where the countryside was defended by paternalistic great landowners. An age when it was possible 'to impose the cultural views of a small minority on the great mass of the population'.<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey M. Boumphrey felt that the 'last hope of that goes with the slipping away of the land from the great owners, who are owed so much for their creation and preservation of the beauty of the past'.<sup>12</sup> He lamented the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> Joad, *The Horrors of the Countryside*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>10</sup> S. Kaye-Smith, 'Laughter in the south-east', in C. Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the beast* (1937), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> G.M. Boumphrey, 'Shall the towns kill or save the country?', in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the Beast*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>12</sup> Boumphrey, 'Shall the towns kill or save the country?', pp. 101-2.

power in the countryside was slipping into the hands of the local authorities, the majority of whom were described by another contributor, Howard Marshall as

uninformed and quite unfitted to deal with this particular duty of preserving our amenities. After all, what are most local authorities? The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker - and frequently the local builder or contractor into the bargain.<sup>13</sup>

He urged that efforts be made to ensure that the 'right people are elected as local authorities - people capable of planning with integrity and intelligence'.<sup>14</sup> However, he was pessimistic and feared the continual decline of the rural landscape under the auspices of 'local tradesman': 'Advertisements and petrol stations and shanties ruin our villages...A gimcrack civilisation crawls like a gigantic slug over the country, leaving a foul trail of slime behind it'.<sup>15</sup>

The writers in this volume clearly saw themselves as guardians of the British countryside. Their most condescending assertion was offered by Joad: the people's claim on the land was paramount but

the people are not as yet ready to take up their claim without destroying that to which the claim is laid...the English countryside must be kept inviolate as a trust until such time as they *are* ready, and ...it is the duty of the readers of this book, together with such others as can be brought to realize their responsibility in the matter, to act in the interim as the people's trustees...<sup>16</sup>

For Joad, motorists were the most hated intruder in the countryside because of the maelstroms of destruction they created. They were worse than the hiker because they

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<sup>13</sup> H. Marshall, 'The rake's progress', in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the Beast*, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> C.E.M. Joad, 'The People's Claim', in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the beast*, p. 64.

devastated a wider area. Of course, as a hiker himself, Joad had more than a passing interest in defending the walker against the motorist.

In his 1988 D.Phil thesis, on middle-class suburbanites in interwar Britain, D.L. North argues that establishment distaste for suburban expansion was most clearly articulated by the preservationist movement, who were strongly propelled by 'a feeling that social inferiors were invading - with both cars and new houses - a hitherto exclusive social preserve'.<sup>17</sup> The scatological language used by Joad and others in the preservationist movement suggests that North had a strong case. Fred Hirsch has argued that it is possible to view the countryside as a 'positional good' whose consumption is dependent on one's social position. It follows that a relatively privileged elite, with access to it, may seek to preserve its amenity values by restricting the access of other social groups.<sup>18</sup> However, as was the case in the urban environment, motoring had a growing and fundamental economic importance in the countryside. It was also being used by the influential middle-classes who might otherwise have been supportive of measures to reduce its part in the despoliation of rural Britain. Even the most outspoken of its opponents offered no firm solutions to the car's part in the erosion of the countryside.

Many of the contributors to *Britain and the Beast* were supporters of the CPRE; Williams-Ellis was the President of its Welsh equivalent. In many respects the CPRE sought an accommodation with the motorist, hoping to achieve progress

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<sup>17</sup> D.L. North, 'Middle Class Suburban Lifestyles and Culture in England, 1919-1939' (Oxford D.Phil, 1988), p. 36-7.

<sup>18</sup> F. Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth*. Cited in Newby, *Country Life*, p. 227.



by persuasion and self-regulation rather than coercion. The CPRE's archives suggest a similar pattern of events to those that surrounded the car and road safety. The CPRE was founded in 1926 and by 1927 had established a close relationship with the AA. The AA provided the CPRE with financial backing, eye-witness reports from its road scouts on developments in the countryside, and advice on issues which involved motoring. From 1927 the AA was a sponsor of the CPRE's efforts to the tune of fifty guineas a year, the latter viewing the former as invaluable in assisting in the organisation of its local committees.<sup>19</sup> The AA also expedited the distribution of CPRE pamphlets.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that the CPRE felt indebted to the AA and were willing to return the favour by aiding its promotion when the opportunity arose. In September 1931, the AA's Deputy Secretary, E.H. Fryer, lunched with H.G. Griffin, the General Secretary of the CPRE. They discussed *This Motoring*, the story of the AA, which had just been written by its Secretary, Stenson Cooke. Griffin promised to help promote the book by sending it to journalists sympathetic to his organisation. He kept his promise, taking the opportunity to suggest to the reviewers that they urge the AA to take a stronger line on the issue of unsightly rural petrol pumps.<sup>21</sup> However, the AA was unwilling to take any significant action against the Motor Agents Association whose members were responsible for many of the offending artifacts.

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<sup>19</sup> Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading: Automobile Association File 78.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, Letter from H.G. Griffin to Fryer (September 1931). Letter from H.G. Griffin to H.H. Child of *The Times* (September 1931). Copies of the book went to CPRE contacts on the *London Mercury*, the *Spectator*, *Country Life*, *The Times* and the *Observer*.

Between late 1932 and early 1933 the CPRE's Reading branch suggested the AA be encouraged to urge its members to boycott all country garages which affronted the country-lovers taste because of their garish multi-coloured petrol pumps, corrugated iron and asbestos construction or the advertisements with which they were regularly covered. The proposal foundered when it became clear that the AA would not cooperate.<sup>22</sup>

In 1933 the AA rejected calls for a conference of CPRE constituent bodies on the question of the unattractiveness of AA Shelters and Telephone Boxes to be found on country roads.<sup>23</sup> The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, the President of the CPRE informed Griffin that it might be best to drop the issue, the AA were their 'constituents, and we ought to be on most friendly terms with them. Not only are they in themselves important, but as a source of intelligence they might really be invaluable'.<sup>24</sup> This intelligence often came through the observations of AA road scouts, who in 1938, for example, described the 79 car dumps they had discovered in town and country. The AA comments on a dump in Ryde on the Isle of Wight described it as situated 'in poor part of town and not out of keeping with the neighbourhood'.<sup>25</sup> In such a case, the dumping of dilapidated motor vehicles was unlikely to raise the middle-class hackles of either the AA's membership or those of the CPRE. Clearly, as in the case of road safety, the AA managed to secure an

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<sup>22</sup> Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading: CPRE File Motor Agents Association, 108/11.

<sup>23</sup> CPRE File: AA Shelters and Telephone Boxes, 78/1.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, Letter: The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres to H.G. Griffin, 15 February 1933.

<sup>25</sup> CPRE File Car Dumps, 111/11/1.

influential role in the debate about motoring and the countryside. In its role as financier, constituent member, and adviser to the CPRE and voice and mentor of several hundred thousand motorists, it ensured that no initiatives arose in the inner councils of the CPRE that in any way limited the motorist's access to the countryside. The only move to limit the extent of car use in the countryside was one proposed by the Pedestrians' Association which made its way into the 1930 Road Traffic Act. The clause stipulated that private motor vehicles were not to be driven more than fifteen yards from the road.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, the CPRE's executive and membership were no doubt amongst those benefitting from the mobility the car offered, in terms of accessing the beauties of the countryside. In the case of the car and motoring generally the CPRE and other preservationists proved more adept at identifying problems than in proposing solutions, largely because they wanted to have their cake and eat it. Their comments on the commercialisation of the countryside - and the car's role in that process - often displayed a contempt and ignorance for those who had to make a living there. For the arrival of large numbers of motorists in rural Britain, at a time of agricultural depression provided many country-based 'butchers, bakers and candlestick makers' with new money-making opportunities. On occasion they may even have served cake to the motoring conservationist in a newly opened 'Olde English tea rooms'. The next sections of this chapter will offer an assessment of rural responses to the increasing numbers of cars on country roads. The extent to which cars were used by country-dwellers themselves will also be investigated.

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<sup>26</sup> PRO MT 34/8.

**‘I am nobody’s good man for a shilling a night’:  
Rural Antagonism towards the Motorist**

It is a generally accepted belief that urban visitors, motorists particularly, are not always welcome in rural Britain. This was certainly true in the case of the earliest motorists. The Royal Commission on the Motor Car of 1906 found that the car was viewed disapprovingly by many rural dwellers. Rural roads were unsuitable for this new form of transport; large dust clouds were thrown up by speeding motor vehicles and crops covered with the resulting debris.<sup>27</sup> Estate agents reported a decline in property values along popular motoring routes: up to 35 per cent in the case of the London to Portsmouth road.<sup>28</sup> County councils were loath to have the rural rate payer finance road improvements that they felt were the responsibility of wealthy motorists.<sup>29</sup> However, the Roads Board, set up in 1910, provided local authorities with large grants to improve roads. The project was financed by an increased taxation on the motorist introduced in the 1909 budget. Following World War One, the Ministry of Transport continued these improvements, with the result that complaints about dust clouds were not a feature of the interwar period. There were, though, a number of issues on which motorists and their cars raised the hackles of Britain’s rural communities in the two decades that followed the Great War.

Graves and Hodge’s *The Long Week-end* provides evidence that country-people’s hostility towards the car could match in physical violence the verbal assaults of Joad and others. They report that ‘[c]ountry people grew to hate cars for their

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<sup>27</sup> W. Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics* (1973), p. 51-2ff.

<sup>28</sup> P. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770* (1974), p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics*, p. 52.

noise, smell, danger and the unconcerned bearing of the drivers, and often encouraged children to pelt them with stones and line the road with glass and upturned tacks to cause punctures'.<sup>30</sup> It would appear that it was such incidents that the *Autocar* was referring to in 1919 when it reported that it was common for children and others to throw stones or bottles at cars. In July of that year the AA were offering a reward of one guinea for information about people who were placing broken bottles on roads.<sup>31</sup> What caused this hostility to the car in country districts? The motivations listed by Graves and Hodge would seem to be an appropriate starting point in seeking an answer to this question.

Whilst no reference to the smell given off by motor vehicles has become apparent there were occasions when the noise of motorists' vehicles caused acrimony. This was true of the motor trials regularly organised in rural districts, with hilly areas proving particularly appealing to the sporty motorist. In 1923 the *Autocar* recognising the potential for damage to the motoring cause, urged the RAC, the official body for all motor sports events, to limit the number of permits it granted to Sunday trials events. Large numbers of cars attending such trials were causing noise and nuisance to church-goers.<sup>32</sup> By 1935 the problem had not abated, complaints about noise, as well as the damage caused by spectators and their parked cars, were still being made.<sup>33</sup> In 1938, the Ministry of Transport warned of a ban on such

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<sup>30</sup> R. Graves and A. Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (New York, 1963), p. 183.

<sup>31</sup> *Autocar*, 10 May and 26 July 1919.

<sup>32</sup> *Autocar*, 25 May 1923.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 15 March 1935.

events if the situation was not brought under control. Rural authorities formed an association to lobby central government on the issue and a number of separate protests were made, the worst affected areas being the Home Counties, the Cotswolds, the West Country and the area around Buxton in Derbyshire.<sup>34</sup>

The danger caused by increased motoring was a further cause of friction between motorist and country-dweller. The treatment of road accident victims proved to be a serious drain on the resources of many rural hospitals. Smaller cottage hospitals on popular motoring routes were most vulnerable, at times becoming 'weekend casualty stations'.<sup>35</sup> It appears that even cottages near danger spots could become unofficial dressing stations for 'dozens of cases in a single holiday season'.<sup>36</sup> The 1930 Road Traffic Act attempted to address this issue, introducing a system of payments from insurance companies to hospitals. However, the measure does not appear to have worked well in practice; in the six months following the Act expenses for the treatment of road accident victims in 36 Yorkshire hospitals amounted to £4,500, but only £123 was recovered from insurance companies who were obviously denying liability.<sup>37</sup> According to the British Medical Association the national figures for 1931 were: costs incurred £64,132; amount recovered £6,575.<sup>38</sup>

The safety problems that arrived with the motorist could also precipitate tensions, and not just with country-dwellers. Other urbanites seeking rest and

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 25 February 1938.

<sup>35</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1928.

<sup>36</sup> Graves and Hodges, *The Long Weekend*,

<sup>37</sup> *Autocar*, 4 March 1932.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 22 April 1932.

relaxation in the countryside had reason to regret the arrival of the car. Many of the estimated 500,000 hikers who joined the motorist in the discovery of rural Britain did so off the roads which had served the Edwardian walker because they had become too dangerous.<sup>39</sup> Cyclists did not have that option, but the pages of the cycling and motoring press bore witness to tension between the two groups, the former often accusing the latter of behaving as if they owned the roads because their road tax paid for their upkeep.<sup>40</sup>

The question of the motorist's speed on rural roads also aroused controversy. As was the case with urban councils, the motoring lobby was always ready to object to the imposition of speed limits by rural councils. In 1933 West Riding Council sought Ministry of Transport approval for a 10 mph speed limit in the village of Addingham near Leeds. The limit had formerly been in force there because the narrow, winding main road offered poor visibility at several points along its 792 yards. The limit was calculated to add only 30 seconds to the journey time through the village. However, the AA opposed the application, their case being upheld by the Ministry which ruled that the road did not differ from many other village roads.<sup>41</sup>

The final cause of the country-person's ill-feeling towards the motorist was what Graves and Hodge described as their 'unconcerned bearing'. Schooled on a literature which encouraged them to envisage the countryside as a playground in which they could indulge their interests, the middle classes were not well-versed in

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<sup>39</sup> Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside', pp. 268-9. The figure of 500,000 is an estimate for the 1930s.

<sup>40</sup> *Autocar* 13 March 1931, for example, reported that the CTC Gazette was constantly at war with the motorist and the motoring press.

<sup>41</sup> *Pedestrians' Association Quarterly News Letter*, July 1933.

knowledge of the real life of agricultural Britain. Ill-considered behaviour or comments about the 'simplicity' of country-folk were guaranteed to raise the hackles of any harassed farmer or other rural residents. Many motoring families were also accustomed to having servants clear up after them; expecting country dwellers to do likewise caused offence. The motoring press carried discussion on littering and admonished offenders. In 1923 one correspondent complained in the *Autocar* about littering near Arundel and appealed to women to stop their menfolk and children from doing it. Being the best in the world the English housewife would be able to do this, it was argued.<sup>42</sup> Despite claims, in the run-up to the 1930 Road Traffic Act, that the problem was largely solved the issue was still surfacing throughout the 1930s.<sup>43</sup> At that point, the *Autocar* employed the tried and trusted method of social emulation, to encourage motorists to leave the countryside clean and tidy following visits there: 'Among campers and caravanners of the better class it is a matter of honour that they leave no litter; motorists are becoming as conscientious. It is up to everyone to set an example'.<sup>44</sup> The *Austin Magazine* struck a similar note in a 1930 editorial entitled 'On playing the game'. It stated that 'the motoring class has distinctive traditions which every member should uphold. So long as traditions are good there is nothing snobbish or anti-modern about respecting them'.<sup>45</sup>

Litter was also a concern of the CPRE, its files revealing that motorists were often guilty of this offence. In 1932 Flora Russell wrote to them to complain about

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<sup>42</sup> *Autocar*, 11 May, 1923.

<sup>43</sup> *Autocar*, 16 August 1929.

<sup>44</sup> *Autocar*, May 29, 1936.

<sup>45</sup> *Austin Magazine*, April 1930.



motorists littering Newlands Corner in Surrey, suggesting that an AA scout be employed in the solution to the problem.<sup>46</sup> Stung by criticism, some motorists took action to solve the problem. In September 1930 a New Forest Campaign group, which included Lady Montagu of Beaulieu from the well-known motoring family, organised 'motor litter parties'. Cars patrolled the forest, collecting litter which was ceremonially burned on Lyndhurst Common.<sup>47</sup> Anti-litter leagues were formed in several areas, including Surrey where in 1929 pioneering legal action was taken against two offending motorists. One case was dismissed while the other resulted in a £1 fine for the car's owner.<sup>48</sup> Certain areas were more affected than others by this problem; those which had been idealised in literature or were closest to cities with high car ownership suffered most. In 1931 Mr Peek a farmer and Chairman of Ottery Urban Council urged Devon County Council to introduce bye-laws aimed at forcing motorists to remove their rubbish which was an eyesore and a nuisance.<sup>49</sup>

As well as leaving refuse behind them, some motorists took home pieces of the countryside with them, in effect committing theft on many occasions. For instance, in 1939 Ian Hannah MP told the Association for the Preservation of Rural Scotland about motorists who had taken stones from his walls, presumably for the adornment of their garden rockeries.<sup>50</sup> An oral interviewee, Sheila Anderson, told

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<sup>46</sup> CPRE File: Automobile Association, 78.

<sup>47</sup> CPRE File: Litter, CI 24.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Exeter Express*, 24 November 1931. *Devon Gazette*, 25 November 1931.

<sup>50</sup> *Autocar* 9 June 1939.

of how she and her father would return from country drives laden with fruit and flowers:

Father used to take us out...Usually er - when either there was either the blackberries ready or the violets and things and really my childhood was spent enjoying the countryside. We didn't have anything else but that was enough, we used to pick flowers and fruit and crab-apples and things like that. And we got around quite a lot really, different places. My father knew the countryside very well.<sup>51</sup>

In time, the farming community came to see these issues as an occupational problem. A.G. Street was a Wiltshire farmer whose writing and radio talks on country life were popular in the 1930s. His was one of the few voices offering a real insight into the working life of the countryside. He remarked upon the bad behaviour of many townspeople, motorists and others, who expected access to somebody else's business premises without permission. However, such intrusions were regarded as inevitable. Any damage caused was looked upon in the same fashion as that 'done by rats or rabbits - an unavoidable expense which their businesses must bear'.<sup>52</sup>

If such developments could be endured it was more difficult to suffer the patronising tone and ignorant manner of many motorists. Motoring guides such as Prioleau's *Car and Country* did little to lessen the condescending images of country people with which many motorists entered rural Britain. Even the *Autocar*'s attempt to limit the damage such attitudes incurred revealed a patronising perspective on country life. An article written by 'Yokel' in 1939, giving advice for motorists on tour in the countryside, advised readers that it was inhabited. Treating it like a

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<sup>51</sup> *Interviewee Six*: Sheila Anderson, b. 1909 (Newark). Interviewed August 1992.

<sup>52</sup> A.G. Street, 'The Countryman's View' in Willaims-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the Beast*, p. 123.

playground had resulted in 'antagonism on the part of the country-dwellers'. It concluded with advice that might be offered today to a tourist heading for a small Greek island.

Remember, too, that they, and the older ones among them particularly, are conservative, religious folk as a rule. Old-fashioned, you would probably say. They still have their "Sunday best" of frills and flounces, and still go to church in the evening. Their ideas, matched with the tempo of their lives, change slowly. Sex films, smart fashions and cocktails are things not real, as they are to town-dwellers, but just outside their world, savouring a little, still, "of the devil"<sup>53</sup>

As the Scott Committee noted, it was just this sort of depiction, which the country-dweller might interpret as 'amused contempt', that contributed to a feeling of discontent.<sup>54</sup> A.G. Street was one who could stomach the ignorance and bad manners of many visitors to the countryside, but those who patronised him pushed his tolerance to breaking point. Like many other farmers, Street augmented his income by allowing caravanners and campers to holiday on his land, even though this often caused him inconvenience. He maintained that those who felt farmers were 'coining it' at a shilling a night per tent or caravan were mistaken, providing amusing examples of the harassment he suffered. On one occasion he was summoned from his dinner at 8.00 pm, after a long day hay-making, to meet a young married couple. He helped them secure their caravan and was then informed that they wanted milk and water brought out to them and a bit of sacking for their dog 'Binkie' to sleep in. Street's patience almost broke: 'It is too much. Milk and water, yes, but a bag for Binkie, no, definitely no. I am no servant of Binkies'. He beckoned the husband out of earshot of his wife, intending to inform him of how hard he had worked that day.

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<sup>53</sup> *Autocar*, 18 August 1939.

<sup>54</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (1941), p. 86.

The young motorist followed him pensively 'looking a little frightened. He probably thinks that I am one of the many rural mental defectives, about which he has read so much', thought Street. But Street relented: '[m]ost of these campers are such charming helpless folk, that I shall drive meekly back to the farm, and get the milk, the water, and the little bit of bag for Binkie'. However, Street had his limits. One motorist, incorrectly reading his social status from a glance at his oil-stained work clothes, patronisingly addressed him as 'my good man'. Street's own social sensibilities were activated by this; the result being the exit of the motorist having been told that Street was 'nobody's good man for a shilling a night'.<sup>55</sup>

The Scott committee identified further sources of animosity towards the car and the motoring classes. The committee viewed 'with profound disapproval' the growth of 'abuses' which came to be associated with the term 'Road-House'. They called for greater strictness in managerial control and licensing particularly where they were situated in or near villages. They reported evidence of disturbance caused through the late hours kept by such establishments and of the ensuing resentment of rural communities.<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to quantify the actual extent of this problem but it seems clear that the Roadhouse phenomenon was comparatively short-lived and largely confined to the Home Counties.

The Scott committee also mentioned the motorist in connection with the continuing shortage of housing for the rural working-class. One factor increasingly associated with the shortfall was the 'growth of the week-end habit'. Wealthy

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<sup>55</sup> A.G. Street, 'The Inner History of Camping' in *Hedge Trimmings* (1933), pp. 45-51.

<sup>56</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (1941), p. 170.

townspeople were acquiring former agricultural cottages 'bought because of their picturesque character and brought up to date with all modern conveniences'.<sup>1</sup> Car ownership abetted this process, particularly in areas near the outskirts of cities, where middle-class motorists might be able to pay three or four times the rent an agricultural labourer could simply to provide themselves with a weekend cottage. The cars of weekenders must have been a very obvious material object through which their privileged status could be identified by any disgruntled agricultural labourer, priced out of the housing market by the new arrivals. However, the farm-worker was, at times, given as much reason to resent his employer's motor car as those of visiting urbanites. In 1923 *Reynold's News* reported the use Norfolk farmers were making of their cars in their efforts to defeat striking labourers.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, flying pickets were using bicycles in a bid to curb the use of non-union labour.<sup>3</sup>

This example brings us to the question of the uses to which the car was put in rural Britain. An evaluation of its uses by country-dwellers will permit a greater knowledge of the complexity of issues surrounding rural motoring than was displayed by many rural preservationists in the period. The next section of this chapter will attempt to provide this evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (1941), pp. 56-61.

<sup>2</sup> A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770-1980* (1988), p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Newby, *Country Life*, p. 168.

## Rural Uses of the Car

The car was used in the countryside by several social and occupational groups. As elsewhere in society the very wealthiest were the first car owners, but they were quickly followed into ownership by farmers, professional and business groups. A final development saw many who worked in towns and cities using the new mobility that the car offered to relocate their family home in the rural areas. On the basis of their econometric analysis Bowden and Turner have concluded that the degree of rurality of the population, as well as professional occupation and income, was an important factor in the diffusion of cars in any given area. They suggest that in rural areas the utilitarian returns of car ownership were higher than in urban areas where distances to work were smaller and public transport better.<sup>4</sup> This omits the fact that one occupational section within rural society, who literally lived on the job, became the most significant car-owning group. For it was the farming community who were identified by contemporaries as the most common car owners in rural society.

Farmers realised numerous advantages through car ownership, not all of which were welcomed by other social groups. By 1921 the *Autocar* was reporting that the majority of rural owners were farmers. It also revealed that this had led to increasing problems between farmers and commercial groups within their local market towns. In Reading, for example, local inn-keepers and others had complained about the parking of farmers' cars in the town and the police had taken action. Resentment had

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<sup>4</sup> S. Bowden and P. Turner, 'Demand for Consumer Durables in the United Kingdom in the Interwar Period', in *Journal of Economic History*, 53 (1993), pp. 251-2.

allegedly arisen because car ownership permitted farmers to return home more promptly than had previously been the case. Out-of-pocket publicans and others were not impressed with this development.<sup>5</sup>

The Scott Committee believed that car ownership provided farming families with 'the advantages of the wider range of shopping facilities in larger centres', thereby making them less reliant on local traders. Alternatively, new forms of transport and commerce meant that purchases could be made 'through the mail-order system, or from commercial travellers of big firms'. However, the Committee concluded that in providing 'many of the varied services the countryman needs' whether for commercial, professional, educational or leisure requirements 'the market town still plays an important role in the countryside'.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1930s, *Farmer's Weekly* often reported the accusations of profiteering levelled at car-owning farmers.<sup>7</sup> In fact many farmers entered the motoring community at the very lowest end of the scale, buying large but cheap second-hand cars. The first postwar motoring farmers not surprisingly bought Fords, the car that had proved so popular with the American farming community.<sup>8</sup> By the 1930s regular articles in their weekly journal were advising farmers they now needed two cars. In 1936 Malcolm Campbell told them that an older car could be used on the farm, but

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<sup>5</sup> *Autocar*, 3 September 1921.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (1941), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Farmer's Weekly*, 19 June 1936, 13 November 1936 and 23 December 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *Autocar*, 23 August 1919. *Garage and Motor Agent*, 10 May 1923 reported that the Ford was employed in farm-work throughout the week and took the family to church on Sunday.

every farmer should also possess a good modern car for off-farm use.<sup>9</sup> However, Campbell's advice may not have been entirely based on a desire to encourage efficient agricultural practice; the Austin Motor Company board minutes reveal that he received payment from that firm in order to encourage motoring wherever and whenever he could.<sup>10</sup> In the same issue another freelance motoring writer, Harold Pemberton, argued that farmers should see their car as an investment. The ideal car should be dual-purpose, capable of absorbing the punishment entailed in taking a load to market, possibly with the assistance of a trailer, and of taking the family on their annual holiday. By this stage it would appear that cars popular with the farming community were in the ten horse power category, with Morris and Austin cars as prevalent among farmers as with other motorists.<sup>11</sup> Older, more powerful cars which could be picked up cheaply, were also sought-after by farmers, as *Farmer's Weekly* put it: 'In the USA town motorists abandon their old cars in the countryside; English town motorists can sell their old cars to the countryside'.<sup>12</sup> By the late 1930s it reported the use of high powered 'but antique' cars for hauling the mower, driving the hay sweep and other heavy jobs.<sup>13</sup> It was not made clear whether these

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<sup>9</sup> *Farmers Weekly*, 19 June 1936.

<sup>10</sup> *Austin Board Minutes*, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. Campbell was a celebrated racing driver and, at times holder of the land-speed record. He also gave publicity to Austin Motors by using their cars in some of his attempts at the record. K. Richardson, *The British Motor Industry 1896-1939* (1977), p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> This assertion is based on the information given in an advertisement for the NFU Mutual Insurance Society Ltd. which appeared in *Farmers Weekly* 19 June 1936.

<sup>12</sup> *Farmers Weekly*, 19 June 1936.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 30 June 1939.



vehicles were the first cars of smaller farmers or the second cars of the most prosperous, but in either case this is a development which should be considered when examining Bowden and Turner's suggestion that the impulse to car ownership was apparently strongest in rural areas. The farmer's car could also transport several farmworkers a mile, in a couple of minutes, to the site of another job; it could do the same in the case of materials or tools. Resourceful farmers even used exhaust fumes to gas rats.<sup>14</sup>

In the light of these considerations it is not surprising that farmers' representatives who gave evidence before the Royal Commission on Transport in 1929 were not drawn into criticism of the car. Their evidence suggests that for them the problems brought by increasing motor traffic were outweighed by the benefits accrued. Although traffic made it more difficult to drive livestock along the road than had been the case, that was simply 'a natural consequence with which we have got to put up'.<sup>15</sup> In return motor vehicles offered the farmer the convenience of door to door road transport. The representatives largely confined their comments to road design, calling for wider roads to accommodate increasing agricultural traffic more safely. They also asked that grants be made available to fund the erection of fencing to protect livestock.<sup>16</sup>

Of course the motoring farmer would not have been typical of rural car-owners. The professional middle-classes would also have been well represented.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, various issues.

<sup>15</sup> *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on Transport: Volume One*, Evidence of John Garton and Frederick Sabatini of the National Farmers Union, 18 December 1928.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

If the car proved a utilitarian aid for the average farmer it would have been equally so for the country doctor, solicitor or clergyman. Car ownership also made it possible for members of the professional middle-classes who practised their calling in cities and towns to move from urban and suburban homes to more rural locations.

Although the extent of this development should not be exaggerated, it is necessary to record that this is a further factor which might explain Bowden and Turner's findings on rural ownership. After decades of depopulation the 1930s witnessed an increase in the population in the rural districts of England and Wales, as Table One indicates.<sup>17</sup> These gains were made at the expense of urban areas.

**Table One**  
**Estimated Increase or Decrease of Population by**  
**Migration (%)**  
**Census of 1931 to Mid-Year of Specified Years**

	1934	1935	1936	1937
<b>England and Wales</b>	0.38	0.50	0.72	0.94
<b>Rural Districts</b>	1.78	1.93	1.68	2.10
<b>County Boroughs</b>	-0.82	-1.22	-1.65	-1.95
<b>Other Urban Districts</b>	0.24	0.66	1.39	1.78
<b>Greater London</b>	1.18	1.70	2.61	3.24

Source: Registrar General's *Statistical Review* (Annual), Cited in A.W. Ashby 'The Effects of Urban Growth on the Countryside', *Sociological Review*, 31 (1940)

Acknowledging this, A.G. Street attributed a good deal of it to increasing car ownership, which in his opinion was beginning to change the social composition of many villages:

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<sup>17</sup> A.W. Ashby 'The Effects of Urban Growth on the Countryside', *Sociological Review*, 31 (1940), p. 356.

Modern road transport, having almost annihilated distance, has brought our villages very near to our towns. One effect of this seems to be a great alteration in the personnel of many villages. Privacy and quiet have now a rapidly increasing value, and more and more townsfolk are coming to the villages to live, their motor cars enabling them to do this and at the same time to continue their town employment...soon the greater proportion will work in the town and the village will have lost its separate identity becoming a suburb of the nearest provincial town.

Life in the countryside was also altered by the possibilities the car offered to the rural family. The car, and the bus, extended the connections of county towns with their hinterland, often at the expense of smaller market towns.<sup>18</sup> As the Scott Committee noted, car ownership increased the incidence of business, shopping and cultural visits to the larger county towns at the expense of local but smaller towns. For others, in more isolated areas, it allowed more frequent trips to the nearest town than had been the case previously. As was the case for the urban middle-classes, car ownership could also boost the rural owner's social status. All of these factors are neatly summed up in the recollections of Eironwy Llewellyn who was brought up in the 1930s on her grandmother's (Mangu) farm in the Neath Valley. The farm was five miles from the nearest town and her first memories are of all transport, both within the farm and outside, being by cart, trap or foot. Then car-ownership changed her family's lifestyle.

Outstanding in my happy memories of those years are 'BNY750' and 'CNY616'. 'BNY750' (always referred to as this) was a shimmering, black Ford 8, complete with carrier on the back, two doors, gleaming chrome handles and bumpers, green, real leather upholstery. She revolutionised Mangu's life, for now she could go to chapel in style, deliver milk and eggs, collect sand for the gecin floor from sand-dunes 15 miles away, even carry the occasional calf or pig, hens and ducks, all in double-quick time and come rain or shine.

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<sup>18</sup> A.W. Ashby 'The Effects of Urban Growth on the Countryside', *Sociological Review*, 31 (1940), p. 351.

Soon after the advent of 'BNY750' came 'CNY616', my father's (he was a teacher at the town school). He was not to be outdone and had, like everyone else fallen totally in love with the Ford 8 vehicle. 'CNY616' was also black but with the most wonderful red leather upholstery. My father used to let us children stand on the running-boards, clinging on for dear life as we pretended to be gangsters, as per James Cagney films, seen at the Empire cinema in Neath...

The magic machines seemed benevolent, giving, generous, reliable, protective, as though they loved life and had come into being to share the fun of life with us. Sounds potty I know but this is how I personally experienced the advent into my childhood of the motor vehicle.<sup>19</sup>

Such perceptions were fundamentally different from those of Joad and his ilk, who did not experience what the car could offer for the previously isolated rural family. Ownership also *furthered opportunities for the extension of one's friends and social circle*. One way of measuring this development would be a project which studied the incidence of marriage between individuals from wider geographical areas. It must be assumed that rising car ownership ensured that this was an increasing trend with many cases mirroring that of Marjorie Clarke, whose story was narrated in chapter three.<sup>20</sup>

It is possible to see, therefore, that the impact of increasing motor traffic in the countryside was rather more complex than the preservationists often wanted to acknowledge. The car transported the urban middle-classes to the countryside most frequently as day-trippers, but also increasingly as either weekenders or permanent residents. As the key determinant of the relocation of such people the car was playing a central role in the changing economy of the countryside. Another of the

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<sup>19</sup> *Letter 10*, Eironwy Llewellyn, 11 August 1992.

<sup>20</sup> *Tape 7*.

preservationists, Sheila Kaye-Smith, noted this in her assessment of the failure of public opinion to prevent countryside despoliation:

The general public, hypnotised by newspaper photographs and railway advertisements, either do not know that rural England is nearly destroyed, or else, satisfied with speed and roadhouses, does not care. Even local opinion..... is not likely to stop the evil. The people who sell the land and build on it are all making money, and the people who live in the new houses probably spend more in the neighbourhood than the farmers and landowners they succeed. Only here and there, from some gardener who would like again to follow the plough, or some garage hand who would rather have the care of beasts, do you hear a lament for the England that is gone.<sup>21</sup>

For those who made a living from the land its value lay not in its scenic qualities but in its commercial value. They viewed rural Britain as a business and they sold, bought and hired pieces of it to make the profits that assisted their survival in an era of falling agricultural prices. There was a clash of interests between the motorist and the pressure groups on the one hand and rural entrepreneurs on the other. One side wanted to perpetuate the countryside as a traditional rustic playground, whilst still having the convenience of travelling through at high speed in their cars. The other sought to profit from the new forms of transport and the opportunities offered in providing fuel, food and drink, accommodation, land for development, and advertising space. Each of the areas where debate surrounding the involvement of the car in rural despoliation emerged in interwar Britain will now be detailed.

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<sup>21</sup> S. Kaye-Smith, 'Laughter in the south-east', in Williams-Ellis, *Britain and the Beast*, p. 42.

## Rural Entrepreneurship and the Car

The most visible effect of increasing levels of motor traffic in the interwar countryside were garages, petrol pumps and filling stations. The last of these were a new phenomenon, the first filling station being built by the AA in 1919, at Aldermaston in Berkshire.<sup>22</sup> Oil companies and small-scale entrepreneurs also saw opportunities to profit from increasing motor traffic. They provided a precious new source of income to a rural economy which had witnessed the death of virtually every industry but farming. The sale of land for garage sites must also have been welcomed by many farming families struggling to pay off mortgages. By 1929 there were an estimated 54,000 petrol stations, many of which had been established in the immediate post-war years by ex-servicemen. Mervyn Gorman, vice-chairman of the RAC, told the Royal Commission on Transport in 1929 that the small sums such men had to invest in their new businesses provided the explanation for their often unsightly condition.<sup>23</sup> Specialised garage building firms were appearing, but many were the work of local builders using cheap materials such as corrugated sheeting and asbestos slabs.<sup>24</sup> Criticism of unsightly garages was at its fiercest when they were to be found in a rural location. The CPRE argued that the problem stemmed from the fact that many garages had previously been cycle repair shops and

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<sup>22</sup> L.E. Morris, *The Country Garage*, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on Transport, Volume 1* (14th November, 1928 to 15th February, 1929), para. 4384.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *The Country Garage*, p. 8. *Master Builder*, August 1928.

their owners had little capital to invest in aesthetically pleasing premises.<sup>25</sup> In 1928 the Petroleum (Consolidation) Act gave local authorities the power to prohibit the location of petrol stations in specified areas and to regulate their appearance in others. However, as was the case with other legislation of this nature, its implementation was at best irregular.<sup>26</sup>

Concerns about the appearance of these establishments were often driven by the urban outsider's image of how rural Britain should look rather than practical considerations. In 1930 the *Autocar* offered advice on the construction of new garages, advocating the principle of 'English architecture for English soil' they suggested Tudor and Queen Anne architectural designs.<sup>27</sup> Whilst claiming to be against 'exaggerated rusticity', the CPRE produced a booklet on approved garage designs, recommending building materials that included timber framing for walls and hardwood or thatch for roofing.<sup>28</sup> The journal *Architect* labelled such suggestions 'incomprehensible' and dangerous.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly such inappropriate design suggestions went largely unheeded, although Figure Two shows examples of garage design that did follow the recommendations. Reporting in 1941, the Scott Committee identified the unsightly petrol station as an on-going problem.<sup>30</sup> Many small-scale

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<sup>25</sup> CPRE File: Petroleum (Consolidation) Act 1928.

<sup>26</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, p. 212. CPRE FILE 108/6/II, Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading.

<sup>27</sup> *Autocar*, 4 April and 25 April 1930.

<sup>28</sup> CPRE File: Petroleum (Consolidation) Act 1928.

<sup>29</sup> *Architect*, 1 January 1931. Cited in CPRE File on Petroleum (Consolidation) Act.

<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, p. 212.

rural entrepreneurs established petrol pumps in unlikely spots. The first roadside pump in Britain appeared in Shrewsbury in 1914; following that hand-cranked pumps appeared in village pubs, shops and other spots. By 1940 the small Warwickshire village of Arley, for example, had a bakery that doubled as a petrol filling station.<sup>31</sup> Occasionally, farmers also sought to profit in this fashion, Figure Three offers an example of a pump sited in a farmer's field.

Motoring on rural roads provided advertising firms with a new arena for their campaigns. *The holidaying or weekending motorist represented a lucrative consumer* and roadside advertising became a further area of controversy involving the car. The *Autocar*, in its role of moral guardian of the motoring community, quickly became aware of the potential damage roadside advertising could do to motoring's image. In 1922 it was arguing that motorists should support SCAPA. As was noted above Shell gained much positive publicity by removing their roadside advertising, replacing them with a series of lorry-posters. However, by the late 1930s the Ministry of Health's planning advisory committee was forced to bemoan the level of unsightly advertising in the countryside.

Along many of the main roads the charm of the countryside has been completely ruined by advertisements, and villages also are seriously disfigured....in the past few years uncontrolled advertising has assumed proportions which warrant us in placing it high among the causes which have helped to destroy some of the beauty of the countryside.<sup>32</sup>

The Scott Committee also castigated rural advertising arguing that it was 'aesthetically and morally an offence that relatively small sections of the community

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<sup>31</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Warwickshire 1940.*

<sup>32</sup> Town and country planning advisory committee, *Report on the Preservation of the Countryside* (HMSO, 1938), p. 5.

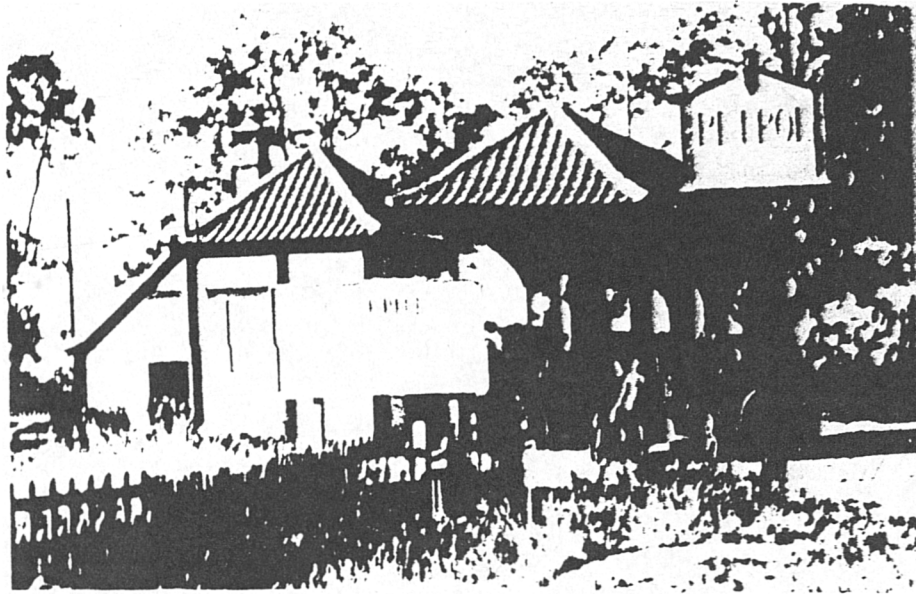


should be able to exploit this common possession'.<sup>33</sup> Roadside advertising was particularly prevalent in areas where the middle-class motoring family might be found. By 1938 an eighty mile stretch of road, from Manchester to Newby Bridge at the foot of Lake Windermere, was decorated by 755 large advertisements, including 103 displaying several advertisements.<sup>34</sup> As in the case of country petrol stations, legislation did exist to limit advertising but it was irregularly used and somewhat flawed. The Advertisement Regulation Acts of 1907 and 1925 gave county councils and rural district councils powers to introduce by-laws preventing disfigurement of the countryside by advertising. There were, though, several problems surrounding enforcement of any such by-law. The greatest was an unwillingness to act on the part of local authorities, given the expense any such action might entail. Any danger of a recourse to the courts may have dissuaded councils from taking action. For example, an advertisement might be placed in a position adjacent to a panoramic view rather than in the viewer's direct line of vision. If a dispute arose and a case went to court the ultimate decision might be guided by the aesthetic opinion of an individual magistrate. At the end of the legal process there was nothing in law to prevent another advertisement being erected in the same spot. Moreover, local by-laws were only applicable in the case of notices of twelve feet in diameter and over.

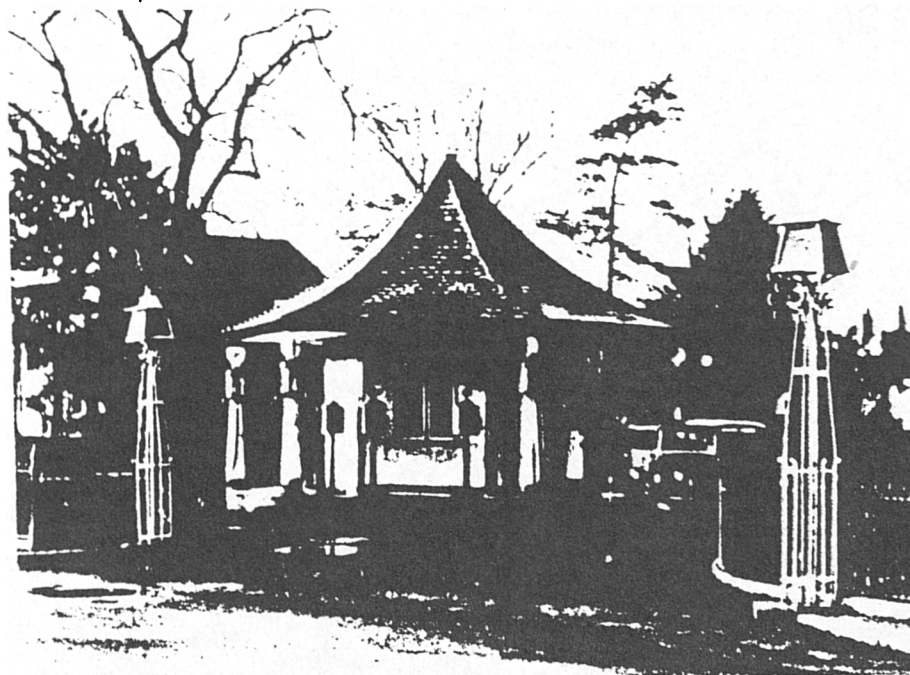
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<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, p. 214.

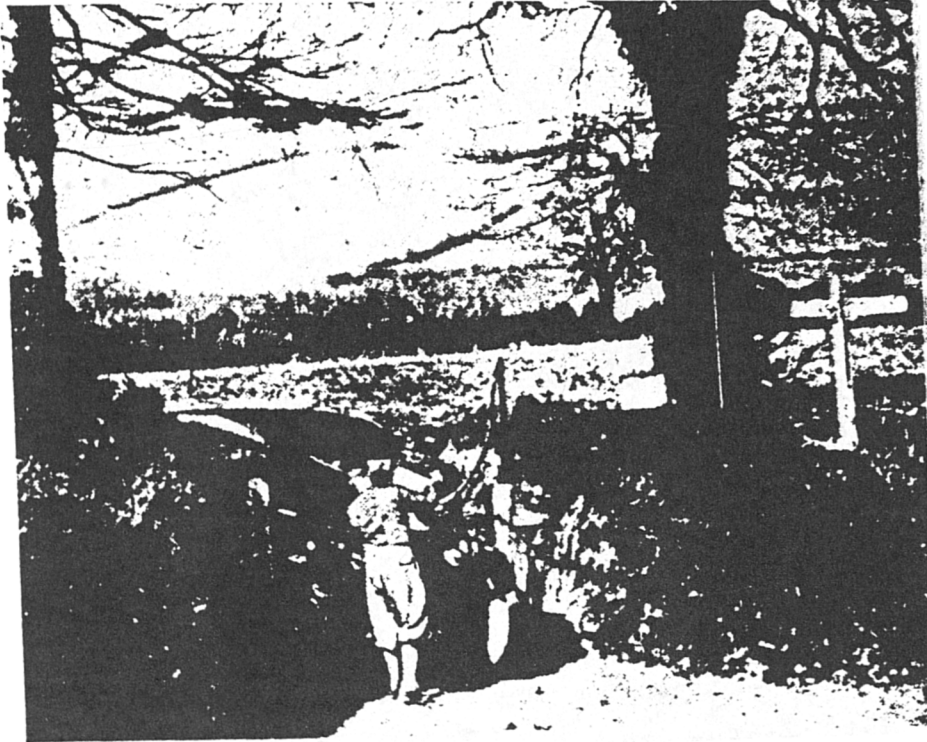
<sup>34</sup> C.E.M. Joad, *The Townsman's Invasion of the Country* (1946), Appendix VII - advertisements.



Examples of petrol-station designs which the CPRE considered commendable.  
 ABOVE: In rustic style, at Oadby, in Leicestershire.  
 BELOW: In pagoda style, at Cheltenham.



*An unusual place for a petrol pump was this one, installed in a gateway at the junction of a farm lane and a road, near Molland, Devon.*



**Figure 3**

Source:

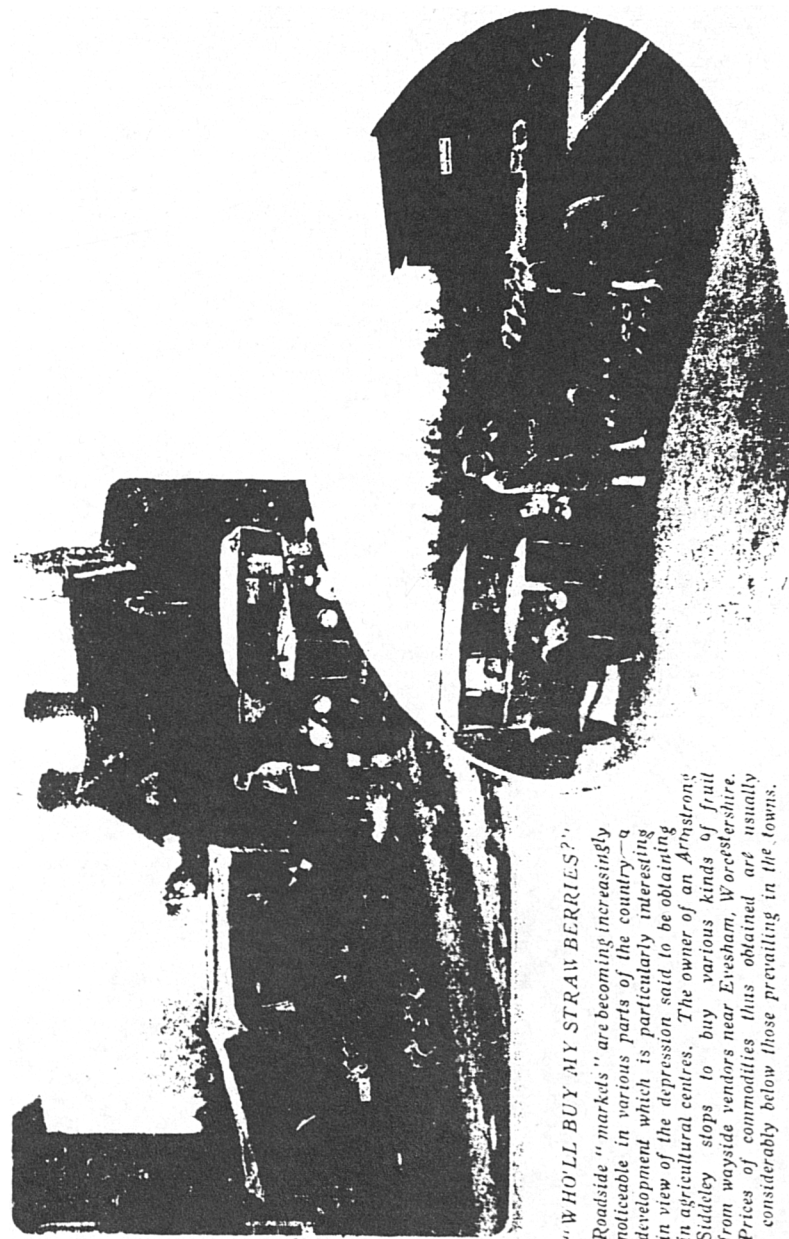
L.E. Morris, *The Country Garage*

However, once again preservationist thinking was at odds with the interests of sections of the rural community who saw the countryside as their business world. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the appearance of advertising signs was testimony to the changing economy of the British countryside. It is clear that much of the advertising which came in for criticism was placed there by the local population. Many advertised a service of their own, bed and breakfast being one example, whilst some farmers took advantage of the convenient position of their land in relation to busy roads by renting sites for advertising hoardings. For instance, in 1929 the *Warwick Advertiser* reported that Merionethshire police had followed up a number of successful prosecutions under local by-laws with visits to boarding-house keepers, cafe-proprietors and farmers with the result that a large number of advertising signs were removed.<sup>35</sup> Farmers not only erected signs on behalf of others, they also advertised their own goods and services, from farm produced food to teas or bed and breakfast for visitors to the countryside. Figure Four offers an example of this type of small scale entrepreneurialism. John Moore remarked upon this development amongst small-holders in the Cotswolds, who were 'naturally eager to sell their produce at the highest possible price', and to do so would 'erect horrible little sheds and shelters at the side of the roads and stick up scrawled notice boards about the price of asparagus or plums'.<sup>36</sup> In 1930 the Vice-Chairman of The Design and Industries Association informed the CPRE of rising concern about the advertising for roadside tearooms, the untidiness of which was said to rival the 'average garage'.

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<sup>35</sup> *Warwick Advertiser*, 2 November, 1929.

<sup>36</sup> J. Moore, 'The Cotswolds', in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the beast*, p. 89.



**Figure 4**      Source:      *Autocar*, July 15, 1927

The proprietors of such establishments were patronisingly described as 'small men anxious to attract attention', but having 'neither means nor education to build anything very decent'. The letter concluded that they should be encouraged to do better in order that 'country motoring should remain popular'.<sup>37</sup>

In some areas earnings from these new sources of income were not insignificant. In 1945 Elizabeth Brunner remarked upon the direct impact that holiday car traffic was having on some areas. As well as noting the 'rash of petrol pumps and wayside cafes' that had been established, she commented on the particular appeal the farmhouse had to mobile travellers, reporting that 'many farmers in holiday areas, such as Devon and Cornwall, calculate on a substantial part of their livelihood being devised from the money they make taking in tourists in the summer'.<sup>38</sup> In 1947 J.A.R. Pimlott estimated that during the agricultural depression of the 1930s some Devonshire farmers derived between 50 and 75 per cent of their income from the tourist trade by the sale of teas, providing accommodation and by letting camp sites.<sup>39</sup> The trade press of the hotelier also consistently reported the new competition presented by rural entrepreneurs.<sup>40</sup> Hoteliers were particularly peeved by the loss of some of their wealthier customers to their semi-professional rivals; it was the cars of such customers that presented them opportunities for more

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<sup>37</sup> CPRE File: Teashop Signs, 161/13. Letter received from Vice-Chairman of The Design and Industries Association 22 September 1930.

<sup>38</sup> E. Brunner, *Holiday Making and the Holiday Trades* (1945), pp. 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> J.A.R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Holiday* (London 1947), p. 242.

<sup>40</sup> See for example *British Boarding House Proprietor and Private Hotelier*, July 1932 and August 1935.

flexible holidaying. Of course, as a consequence of having bought a car, family finances might have been reduced enough to make staying in an idyllic rural farmhouse or cottage financially prudent as well as aesthetically attractive.

### **Which Areas Were Most Affected by the Car?**

Two conclusions can be drawn from the evidence considered thus far. The first being that much of what rural conservationists saw as disfigurement of the countryside was actually being perpetrated by those who lived there. The second is that the impact of the car in the countryside was somewhat uneven. Clearly, in terms of tourism, the motorist had an impact in areas that were also popular for other travellers - such as Devon and Cornwall. But the car provided the opportunity to gain access to remoter areas, more frequently, than the walker, cyclist or those reliant on other forms of transport. This penultimate section of the chapter will seek to identify the rural areas in which the car had greatest impact.

Two immediate qualifying points must be offered. Firstly, as Simon Miller has recently remarked, the urban bias in British social science has provided a poor fabric on which to weave any analysis of the car's impact in rural Britain. In particular, there is a dearth of studies on local rural communities.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, a variety of geographical, economic and social factors were involved in the processes by which certain areas or individual villages were more affected by increasing car

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<sup>41</sup> S. Miller, 'Land, Landscape and the Question of Culture: English Urban Hegemony and Research Needs', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 8 (1995), pp. 100-102.

ownership than others. Determinants could include proximity to large urban centres, as was the case in the Home Counties, where the greater car-ownership was a factor in increasing suburbanisation and other forms of urban encroachment. The obverse of this was the case of the West Country, whose distance from urban and industrial areas made it a particularly seductive retreat for motorists.

Between 1919 and 1939 862,500 houses were built in 'rural districts', 700,000 of which were erected by private enterprise.<sup>42</sup> It is certainly no coincidence that car ownership also rose sharply during this period and although impossible to quantify the exact extent it is clear that the possession of a car made a move to a more rural area an attractive possibility for many families. However, it is also necessary to remember the view of John Sheail on suburbanisation, who has argued that these trends cannot be entirely explained in terms of cheaper houses and the advent of the motor car. He maintains that 'mortgages and the Ford Eight, or Austin Seven, only facilitated a social movement which was already gathering momentum'.<sup>43</sup>

It is very clear that it was the rural South East, particularly London's hinterland, which saw the greatest degree of change due to higher than average car ownership amongst its relatively prosperous professional and middle-class groups. In the late 1920s car ownership in Surrey stood at 1 for every 22.6 people, whilst in Glamorgan the figure was 1 in 87.2 and in Durham 1 in 128.5.<sup>44</sup> London County Council's 1935 launch of the Green Belt Scheme, which provided large sums of

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<sup>42</sup> *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Sheail, *Rural Conservation in Interwar Britain*, p. 76.

<sup>44</sup> *Sell to Britain Through the Daily Mail* (n.d., circa 1929). A.A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950* (Nairn, 1991), p. 105.



money to help acquire and preserve open spaces and farmland in neighbouring counties, is evidence of the growing concern that surrounded increasing suburbanisation and ribbon development.<sup>45</sup> The Ministry of Health's Town and Country Planning Advisory Committee report on *The Preservation of the Countryside*, published in 1938, reported the spread of building outwards from large centres of population, London in particular. A major factor in this development was identified as 'the desire to take advantage of the new transport facilities, and to live in the country'.<sup>46</sup> Obviously elements of the prosperous middle-classes of the south-east were making new homes for themselves in the countryside.

Some popular holiday areas witnessed the impact of increasing motoring at earlier stages than others. The frequency with which references to Devon and the South West in general occur suggests that these were areas where the impact of the holidaying motorist was felt earliest. William McKenzie, who travelled regularly as part of his work in the 1930s remembers the growing number of Cornish country cottages offering rooms to motorists:

The number of cheap cars that were bought were enormous and people began to flood down to Cornwall for a holiday. And the cottages used to put up these signs, three and six bed and breakfast. What sort of breakfast you got for three and six I can't imagine. But they, they during the summer months, June, July, August - up and judging by the number of cars that you'd see standing outside cottages they did a fair trade. Of course there was no control whatever of, I think nowadays people are, are, are subject to some sort of regulation about toilet facilities and so forth.

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<sup>45</sup> The scheme was extended and given statutory effect under the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act in 1938. Sheail, *Rural Conservation in Interwar Britain*, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Town and Country Planning Advisory Committee, *Report on the Preservation of the Countryside*, p. 4.

*Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* (1935) reveals the extent to which hotels in the county were having to cater for the car or risk losing business; of 18 hotels taking advertising space, 13 offered garage facilities and 3 of the remaining 5 were accredited by the AA or RAC.<sup>47</sup> Many farms and cottages no doubt let rooms on a fairly casual basis but others appeared in *Kelly's Directory*. The Cottage Guest House, at Bickleigh Bridge, was advertised as being four miles from Tiverton and a good centre for a motoring, golf, fishing or hunting. The 'pleasantly situated' village of East Allington had three farms advertising accommodation in 1935, one of them offering 'Superior farmhouse accommodation' with 'indoor sanitation'.

Elsewhere, local social relations prevented some of the changes that increased motoring brought to most regions. For example, the Cotswolds did not witness the arrival of by-pass roads in this period. This was due to the presence of a wealthy landed elite in the area who, retaining a great deal of local political influence, protected the geographical status quo in order to conserve their shooting territories. The continual presence of large landowners also ensured that little land in the area was sold off for development, although even in the Cotswolds the ubiquitous garages and golf courses were appearing.<sup>48</sup> The area was without one necessary catalyst for change, a large local city with a professional middle-class community dreaming of their own idyllic place in the country, and may be regarded as untypical in that respect.

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<sup>47</sup> *Kelly's Directory of Devonshire* (1935).

<sup>48</sup> J. Moore, 'The Cotswolds' in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the Beast*, pp. 86-90.

However, even in areas with very low levels of car ownership, such as the rural North East of England, local economic needs ensured that aspects of the old made way for the new. Although the report on the rural North East for *Britain and the Beast* was pleased to announce minimal despoliation of that area, the author was alarmed by the decision of Gainford parish council in County Durham to convert its 'lovely village square' into a concrete car park. Once again the economic requirements of the rural community were at odds with the wishes of a preservationist.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

One final quotation from C.E.M. Joad serves to underline the distance there was between those who lived in the countryside and saw its value in economic terms and those who clung to a vision of an unchanging rural Britain. In his 1946 book *The Untutored Townsman's Invasion of the Country* Joad wrote of the following confrontation:

As I came up Amberley Mount I came upon a small Austin car perched on its very top. I rushed up to remind the owner of that neglected law that forbids the motorist to park his car more than 15 yards from the highway. Within sat a young man and his girl. Were they enjoying the air? They were not; the windows of the car were shut. Were they enjoying the view? They were not; their backs were turned to it. Were they making love? Nothing of the sort....The car carried a portable wireless set; this was turned on and, as I opened the door to put my head in to remonstrate. I heard a voice. The young man and his girl were sitting on the top of Amberley Mount listening to the Fat Stock Prices over the wireless.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> T. Sharp, 'The North-East - Hills and Hells', in Williams-Ellis (ed), *Britain and the Beast*, p. 158.

<sup>50</sup> Joad, *The Untutored Townsman's Invasion of the Country*, p. 210.

The thought occurs: were these not possibly a young farming couple forced to drive to the top of the hill in order to get a decent reception for the news that might affect the economic life of the countryside?

In his comments on dealing with the motorists who camped on his farm, A.G. Street pointed out that he did not much appreciate the advice the campers and caravanners received from their camping association on dealing with the countryside's 'inhabitants'. He objected to being called an inhabitant, as if he was from a different country. But in many ways he was. What a study of the car in the rural environment reveals is that it was used there by two very different groups with contrasting outlooks on the countryside. For the urban middle-class motoring family the car provided the means by which they could escape city life and immerse themselves in a rural world that was to a large extent an imaginary one. Despite the fact that great symbol of modernity, the car, had brought them there they were often disturbed to see the countryside of their dreams increasingly subjected to the modernity they thought they had left behind in the city. For country-dwellers the car could be a nuisance or a positive boon, the individual's perceptions being shaped by their own access, or lack of it, to a car. Even for those who had no car of their own the car might be looked upon as the conveyor of wealthy customers, the source of welcome capital at a time of economic uncertainty. Thus, the countryside was not about to reject the car; and though many middle-class Britons might have regretted the changes that increased motoring brought to rural Britain, they nonetheless wanted to motor there themselves. For them the countryside was a positional good; it was the access of others that they would have been happy to prevent, not their own.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has argued that the technology of the car was socially constructed. Social, cultural and political factors were as important in the car's development as economic or technological considerations. In each of the areas that have been examined it is possible to envisage other possible trajectories along which the car, motoring and transport could have developed.

At the heart of the analysis offered here has been a recognition of the importance of class and gender in shaping the car and motoring. Both played pivotal roles in the way the car was designed and sold, as well as in the uses to which it was put. It was seen, for instance, that middle-class taste strongly influenced the policies of motor manufacturers. Each large manufacturer found it necessary to produce a variety of models to meet each middle-class market-niche. Consequently, unit production costs were higher than need have been the case and the possibilities of cutting costs and pushing the market into the third stage - the mass market stage - were considerably reduced.

The impact of middle-class status concerns on car design has been acknowledged in previous analyses. However, the impact of those same concerns on the use of hire purchase has been recognised for the first time in this study. It is clear that middle-class motorists were not eager to reveal their use of this method of payment. This reinforced traders' concerns about instalment payment schemes and the conservatism of the UDT, financial institutions and manufacturers. As a result, potential sales were inevitably lost as all concerned remained almost secretive about the system, rather than seeking to de-stigmatise it through advertising and other forms of promotion. Thus, economic historians have been correct to highlight hire

purchase's role in the diffusion of cars, but they have failed to ask why its estimated use was lower in the UK than in many other countries. The evidence offered here provides at least part of the answer to that question.

The study has drawn widely upon the excellent work of economic historians, particularly that of Sue Bowden and Paul Turner. Their analyses have proved extremely informative and evidence provided here suggests that the great majority of their findings are correct. However, in many respects the analysis presented here is more complex and therefore more accurate. This is so for a number of theoretical and methodological reasons. Following Bourdieu and Douglas, this study has acknowledged the importance of symbolic notions in every aspect of motoring, including the part this played in the diffusion of car ownership. Thus, Bowden and Turner's employment of such terms as luxury and necessity good has been questioned. In particular the use of the term 'necessity' in reference to the car has been seriously challenged by evidence suggesting that the car was still predominantly employed for leisure purposes in interwar Britain. On a more philosophical level, the extent to which the car as a mode of transport was a necessity has been questioned. Its role in expressing pre-existing social relations has been clearly portrayed and these factors must form part of any analysis of growing car use.

Examples of this latter argument can be found in several of the discussions in this study. It has been shown that the car had an attraction to the middle-class family as the means of transferring social space into geographical space, enabling them to travel to more select coastal resorts or along the quiet highways and byways of rural Britain. In order to achieve this, many middle-class families were prepared to restructure family finances. This meant economising on other areas of expenditure,

often to the disapproval of hoteliers and others in the coastal service sector. Such people found that mobility offered by the car reduced their income by encouraging motorists to travel home rather than staying the night, and to bring a picnic rather than spending money in the resort.

The car also became important in terms of gender, particularly in respect to middle-class masculinity. A Ministry of Transport survey revealed the low proportion of women holding driving licences in the 1930s - only 12 per cent. The first and most obvious reason for this was low car ownership amongst women. The second, which has been revealed by analysis of motoring magazines and confirmed by oral history, was that ideas about the control of the car were assimilated into traditional notions about gender and technology. According to this thinking masculine attributes made for better drivers, even if accident figures contradicted this assessment. Popular notions about feminine traits ensured that women were often identified as responsible for aesthetic aspects of the car. The growing emphasis on annual model changes was thus adjudged by many to be the result of increasing feminine interest in motoring. In fact this development had more to do with the commercial orchestration of the market: manufacturers were coming to recognise the importance of planned obsolescence. The pattern was also largely the result of the middle-class search for distinction which was identified above. This means that in the trend towards annual model changes the male of the family was just as implicated as the female, if not more so (as the buyer and driver of the car in the great majority of cases).

This study has also offered new evidence about the social background of car owners. The sample collected for this thesis and evidence about owners garnered



from newspaper reports, suggest that working-class ownership may have been a small but significant phenomenon by the end of the 1930s. Such owners are significant for four reasons. Firstly, the fact that many of them achieved ownership by car-sharing again offers an example of an alternative course for this technology. Many working-class owners were happy to come to an agreement and share the costs of motoring. Of course, industrial and commercial interests are not often given to suggesting that consumers share ownership of their products. In the case of the car, though, car-sharing could have made sense to many families who used it only occasionally - often licensing it for only part of the year. However, a policy of this kind was unlikely with an artefact which was beginning to hold such a central place in middle-class distinction.

Secondly, these working-class owners suggest that if manufacturers and dealers had cut costs and extended hire-purchase deals, they might well have found a market, particularly for second-hand models. It seems clear that industry assessments of the market were conservative and that they failed to consider the fact that consumers might be prepared to radically alter family spending if a prized commodity came within reach. Alternatively, prospective buyers might have been prepared to seek a second job, or engage in any of the strategies uncovered in Chapter Two.

Thirdly, a high proportion of the working-class owners who were discovered during research for this study had connections with transport or motoring. This was also true of a number of lower-middle-class motorists. It is clear that the incidence of car ownership was much increased for those with connections that enabled them to gain knowledge about maintenance, spare parts or how to acquire a cheap car.

Fourthly, in relying on SMMT figures for market estimates, Bowden and Turner may also have underestimated the potential market. Their reliance on head of household income data ensures that their model omits the possibility that working wives, sons or daughters could contribute to motoring expenses. This may have enabled many families who seemingly did not fit the car-owning criteria to do so. Thus, the diffusion model associated with consumer-demand theory, which might be depicted as a pyramid with ownership of a good trickling down through the classes, is not entirely accurate on this occasion. It is possible to envisage, for example, a well-paid car-worker with knowledge of the second-hand trade achieving car ownership before the lower-middle-class bank clerk. The latter might also be struggling to pay a child's school fees.

This study has endeavoured to contribute to an understanding of interwar motorists as a heterogeneous grouping, as revealed by evidence regarding working-class ownership revealed herein. However, this group was inevitably a minority of motorists, particularly in the earlier years under consideration. This thesis has, therefore, often focused on middle-class culture. In writing about this culture an effort has been made to understand some of the intricacies of the term middle-class in this period. Clearly, we are dealing with a restless and heterodox grouping. As Alison Light has argued, this made 'the proliferation and rigidities of class distinctions all the more competitive'.<sup>[1]</sup> This facet of middle-class culture has emerged in a number of areas. It emerged most obviously in the patterns of taste and discernment which led manufacturers to follow a pattern of model differentiation. It

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<sup>[1]</sup> A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (1991), p. 98.  
Unless otherwise stated place of publication of books cited is London.

resurfaced in the motorist's choice of destinations for holidays and days out. In this respect the car enabled motorists to convert social space into geographical space. This was most true for the wealthiest motorists who toured the continent, but it was also true for the budgeting motorist who made a virtue of a necessity, put a tent in the back of their car and drove off for short stays on the land of obliging farmers. Differences between middle-class groups were also evident in debates over the disfigurement of the countryside. In that case the middle-brow culture of many motorists was often the brunt of derisory comment from an intellectual elite that Bourdieu would define as the dominated faction of the dominating class.

The same tendency also appeared in debates about road safety where there was a striking readiness amongst motorists to find scapegoats for increasing road casualties, the letters pages of the motoring press providing a useful entrée into some of the distinctions prevalent in middle-class minds. At first these scapegoats were other middle-class motorists, although they were usually defined as social parvenus, either war-profiteers or other forms of *nouveaux riches*. Most frequently the middle-classes seemed ready to believe that their wives, sisters or mothers could be to blame for much of the bad driving on the roads, if, that is, they were able to take the driver's seat in the first place.

There were middle-class opponents of the car in this area as well, particularly in the Pedestrians' Association, but their influence was swamped by the vast majority of middle-class opinion. As ownership spread through the middle classes, they realised its utilitarian role as well as what it could offer in terms of personal distinction or even masculine identity. Increasingly, groups other than motorists were targeted for education and road safety campaigns, thereby easing the guilt of

individual motorists who continued to take to the roads with a potentially dangerous technology. Evidence revealed here indicates that manufacturing and commercial interests clearly manipulated the road safety debate, ensuring minimal legislation.

Chapter Five, which deals with the issue of road safety, is probably the most contentious. Millions of people benefit daily from the convenience and mobility the car can offer. This includes academic historians who have largely failed to examine the negative side of the car. In this respect many share a belief in the ideology of road safety. In January 1994 an early version of the road safety chapter was presented at the Social History Society Conference. The paper was greeted uneasily by the majority of the audience who had just chuckled their way through a paper on drunk-driving. That paper made claims about the gradual decline in road casualties in spite of rising car-use. In 1987 5,339 people were killed in road accidents in Britain, 316,070 were injured. Those figures do not seem to indicate any great success story.<sup>[2]</sup> They also serve as a very striking example of how the development and control of technology are reflections of social relations. In the early years of motoring, outrage about the loss of life caused by private motoring diminished as ownership spread throughout middle-class Britain. Instead, faith was placed in road safety policies which could have only a limited effect when the crux of the problem has been a potentially dangerous technology in the hands of fallible human beings. 'These things' have not righted themselves.

In the course of this study a variety of important issues have been discussed. Employing a theoretical approach influenced by Douglas and Bourdieu, it has been

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<sup>[2]</sup> Economic Commission for Europe (Geneva), *Statistics of Road Traffic Accidents in Europe*, 35 (New York, 1990).

possible to establish important trends between consumption and social relations in respect to interwar motoring. The work of Judy Wacjman also proved influential in suggesting that technologies should be understood as social constructs that in turn play their part in evolving social relations. The interwar period was chosen because it was the first period of mass motoring and as such seemed potentially important in terms of establishing long-term attitudes towards motoring. In several areas the findings presented here suggest that that was certainly the case. However, the story of to what extent those patterns remained and of how much they changed remains to be told. Several significant areas of investigation into the social history of the car in post-second world war Britain might be pursued. It would be particularly interesting to see how relations on the road developed once large numbers of working-class motorists appeared. A question following this one would be: how did gender affect these new motoring families? When, if ever, did the myth of the woman driver die? Does the sociologist Bob Connell's notion that traditional masculinity is particularly strong amongst working-class men indicate that we would find that women in working-class families in the 1960s, say, were less likely to drive than middle-class women?<sup>[3]</sup> Finally, what would a study of the built environment in post-war Britain reveal about social relations and motoring?

At the moment it is only possible to hypothesise about answers to these questions. The recent work of American historians on the car's impact in several of these areas provides a number of possible answers for some of these questions. Thus, Howard L. Preston's study of Atlanta in the first third of this century reveals the extent to which increasing automobile ownership led to the increasing segregation of

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<sup>[3]</sup> R. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge, 1987).

the city.<sup>[4]</sup> Affluent whites and the smaller middle-class Black community were provided with individual transport, allowing them to relocate in the growing suburbs outside the city. The construction of major new roads around the ghetto areas physically isolated the majority of blacks. It would be interesting to learn if similar processes occurred in 1950s, 1960s or 1970's Britain. How many inner city working-class communities were segregated in this fashion?

In her study of gender and American car culture, Virginia Scharff suggests that although the car was to remain inextricably intertwined with masculinity, the end of the 1930s saw less animosity and mythologising about women at the wheel than had been the case in earlier years.<sup>[5]</sup> She argues that this was largely the result of American women having the financial independence to buy the cheaper cars available there. It is clear that this was certainly not the case in Britain. Statistics reveal that women were still only a small minority of licence-holders in the 1960s. Today, they still lag behind men but are beginning to catch up. Was it only the increasing financial independence achieved by British women at work in the 1960s and 1970s that allowed the numbers of women motorists to rise? If this was the case it suggests the continuing importance of gender in the car culture.

Scharff and Preston are just two of several American historians writing quality social histories of the car. Their work is important and enlightening and should be mirrored in this country. This thesis has been an attempt to begin this process.

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<sup>[4]</sup> H.L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta*, (Athens, Geo.,1979).

<sup>[5]</sup> V. Scharff, *Taking The Wheel: Women And The Coming Of The Motor Age* (New York, 1991).

## **Appendix One**

**Appendix One**  
**Details of a Sample of Interwar Motorists**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Car Owner</b>	<b>Other Details</b>
<b>1 William Rhodes</b>	William Rhodes Confectioner	Jowett: Used for business
<b>2 Harold Poyser</b>	Harold Poyser Bus Driver	Sold car spares as a sideline. Wife worked in a Building Society
<b>3 Eugenie Michaelis</b>	Her Father Garage Owner	Eugenie drove the car and worked in father's business. Mother owned a shop
<b>4 Robert Burrowes</b>	Robert Burrowes Property Repairer	
<b>5 Elen Speight</b>	Elen Speight Hairdresser	Had own salon. 2nd hand Austin 7 1935. Used hire purchase later on
<b>6 A.E. Garner</b>	His Father Local Government	A.E. Garner drove the car. He was a draughtsman. Mr Garner Snr supplemented his £4 wage by playing in dance band
<b>7 Thomas Wallace</b>	Thomas Wallace Craftsman	His wife was a machinist. Bought Morris Minor in 1934
<b>8 Kathleen Tootil</b>	Kathleen Tootil Teacher	New Austin 7, bought for her by father - a chemist - in 1927
<b>9 John Methven</b>	John Methven Office Worker	Ford bought 1928. Cousin of Ford dealers
<b>10 Harold Holder</b>	Harold Holder White collar worker	Rover 12. Used hire purchase
<b>11 Alice Craig</b>	Alice Craig Shop Assistant	Austin 7 - 1927. Bought by father - demolition contractor
<b>12 Thomas Marriot-Moore</b>	Thomas Marriot-Moore: Office work	Jowett in 1933 - £5. Worked for Ford dealership



<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Car Owner</b>	<b>Other Details</b>
<b>13 Chris Bevan</b>	Chris Bevan Car Worker	Several second hand cars. Costs shared with brother and others. Used H.P.
<b>14 Reg Watkin</b>	Reg Watkin Car Worker	Standard 9 1935 - £47. Shared costs with brother. Others helped with maintenance
<b>15 Phil Hitchman</b>	Phil Hitchman White Collar Worker	3 wheeled Morgan 1935. He drove father paid
<b>16 John Flitcroft</b>	His father Garage Owner	Rover 8 1922 - £17
<b>17 William McKenzie</b>	William McKenzie Post Office Inspector	2nd hand Singer 1930 - £60. Expenses paid by P.O.
<b>18 William McKenzie</b>	Mrs McKenzie Wife of the above	New Morris 8 1933. Bought and chosen by her husband
<b>19 Janet Done</b>	Janet Done Doctor	Austin 7 1935/6 - £40. Expenses paid by employer
<b>20 Janet Done</b>	Her Father Teacher	Ford - 1920s
<b>21 Sheila Anderson</b>	Mr Anderson Analytical Chemist	Husband of Sheila. Morris Cowley 1930s
<b>22 Sheila Anderson</b>	Her father Piano Tuner and shop owner	2nd hand cars in 1920s
<b>23 Sheila Anderson</b>	Miss Foot Scientist	Employed Sheila as chauffeur in 1930s
<b>24 Gay Parker</b>	His father Cinema projectionist and insurance agent	2nd hand Clyno 1930s. Infrequent use. Often repaired by mechanic friend.
<b>25 Marjorie Clarke</b>	Her husband Teacher	2nd hand Austin 7. Shared some costs with friends. Sold before marriage

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Car Owner</b>	<b>Other Details</b>
<b>26 Leonora Wain</b>	Her husband Delivery driver	2nd hand Ford 1938
<b>27 Tony Bird</b>	Tony Bird Motor Trade Clerk	2nd hand Morris 1934 - £6
<b>28 John Miller</b>	Unknown friend of his father	His father, a lorry driver, had use of car and in return helped with costs
<b>29 Thelma Bland - Goodsall</b>	Her uncle Grocer: rented shop	2nd hand car. Thelma's father was a car worker
<b>30 Eironwy Llewellyn</b>	Her grandmother Farmer	Ford 8 from mid 1930s. Used for work and leisure
<b>31 Eironwy Llewellyn</b>	Her father Teacher	Ford 8 mid 1930s
<b>32 Mollie Easton</b>	Her father Agricultural merchant/farmer	Car owner by 1914
<b>33 Mollie Easton</b>	Mollie and fiance/husband Teacher	2nd hand Morgan and Morris cars. Mollie was also a teacher before marriage and they pooled finances to buy cars
<b>34 Connie Foster</b>	Her father Company Rep.	Connie drove him around clients
<b>35 Connie Foster</b>	Connie Foster Unpaid chauffeur	Given brother's car
<b>36 Mary Waugh</b>	Her father School master	Owened car from 1924. His brother owned garage

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Source: Oral interviews, questionnaires and correspondence.

## **Appendix Two**

**Appendix Two**  
**Drivers' Occupations as Reported in a Sample**  
**of Press Coverage of Road Accidents etc**

**1920**

- 1 Pub Landlord
- 2 Publican
- 3 Married woman (Hulme, Manchester. 4 weeks a driver)

**1922**

- 4 Doctor

**1923**

- 5 Licensee
- 6 Single woman
- 7 Cotton Finisher
- 8 Confectionary Commission Agent

**1924**

- 9 Chauffeur (Female)
- 10 Commercial Traveller
- 11 Motor Engineer

**1925**

- 12 Commercial Traveller
- 13 Master Plumber
- 14 Bank Clerk

**1926**

- 15 Carrier (Age 32)
- 16 Music Teacher (Female: Killed by a car her father described as 'their car')
- 17 Fruit Salesman

**1927**

18 Plasterer (19)

**1928**

19 Motor Body Builder  
 20 Greyhound Trainer  
 21 Pub Landlord  
 22 Builder and Contractor  
 23 Commercial Traveller  
 24 Chemical Manufacturer  
 25 Flagger

**1929**

26 Manufacturing Chemist  
 27 Motor Engineer (young)  
 28 Articled Clerk (20)  
 29 Newsagent and Tobacconist  
 30 Builder and Contractor (saloon car)  
 31 Traveller  
 32 Engineer  
 33 Vicar  
 34 Traveller  
 35 Salesman (36)  
 36 Schoolmaster  
 37 Twelve Young men travelling to North Wales for the day in two large cars  
 (one 23, single; one 22, single, paviour; one single, glass cutter; one meter  
 fixer; one postman; one plasterer. All with addresses in working class  
 districts of Manchester.  
 38 Surveyor  
 39 Engineer (23)  
 40 Mechanic (26)

**1930**

- 41 Commercial Traveller
- 42 Butcher
- 43 Commercial Traveller
- 44 Mill Furnisher
- 45 Theatrical Agent (50)
- 46 Mill Manager
- 47 Dyer (Single with a small car)
- 48 Doctor
- 49 Garage Proprietor
- 50 Sports Outfitter
- 51 Shipper (Chauffeur-driven)
- 52 Shop Assistant (Female)

**1931**

- 53 Baker, Engineer and Labourer (All single men in a small car)
- 54 Cinema Manager (27)
- 55 Chartered Accountant (29)
- 56 Salesman
- 57 Engineer (33)
- 58 Master Engineer (55)
- 59 Manager of Provincial Dairies (60)
- 60 Motor Salesman and Auctioneer
- 61 Wholesale Bakers and Confectioner's Agent (38)
- 62 Nurse (Female: on a motoring holiday with female friend)
- 63 Retail Butcher (19)
- 64 Builder and Contractor
- 65 Female: chauffeuring businessman father
- 66 Aeronautical Engineer
- 67 Agent

**1932**

- 68 Engineer
- 69 Butcher
- 70 Commercial Traveller
- 71 Boxer (Flyweight Champion of Europe)
- 72 Motor Dealer
- 73 Principal in firm of general ironmongers
- 74 Manager of gas works
- 75 Stockbroker and Bank Director
- 76 Sales Manager (48)
- 77 Doctor
- 78 Company Director
- 79 Sand Merchant (43)

**1933**

- 80 Oldham Tramway Inspector (33, with wife and 4 children)
- 81 Assistant Schoolmaster
- 82 Salesman (43)
- 83 Salesman
- 84 Works Manager
- 85 Master Baker (37)
- 86 Manager (chauffeured)
- 87 Poultry Dealer

**1934**

- 88 Landlord (Gorse Hill Hotel, Stretford. Waiter from there believed to be driving the car)
- 89 Gown Manufacturer (Female, Mrs)
- 90 Commercial Traveller (Female, Miss, driver of 21 days)
- 91 Actor
- 92 Doctor
- 93 Machine Toolfitter (23)
- 94 Wholesale Meat Agent (26)
- 95 Company Director
- 96 Doctor
- 97 Motor Mechanic
- 98 Decorator (61)
- 99 BBC Employee (Female, Mrs: Husband also BBC employee)

**1935**

- 100 Building Contractor (49)
- 101 Manager: C.W.S. Soap Works
- 102 Salesman (72)
- 103 Salesman
- 104 Commercial Traveller (52)
- 105 4 in a car - including a Burler and Mender, a Retailer and a Weaver)
- 106 Female (Director's wife learning to drive)
- 107 Commercial Traveller (45)

**1936**

- 108 Bookmaker (35)
- 109 Cotton merchant
- 110 Headmaster
- 111 Omnibus Inspector
- 112 Commercial Traveller (35)
- 113 Doctor (female)
- 114 Butcher
- 115 Boxer
- 116 Company Secretary (Cotton Brokers)
- 117 Teacher (30)
- 118 Partner in Motor Hire firm (46)
- 119 Professional Cricketer

**1937**

- 120 Tailor
- 121 Engineer
- 122 Barrister
- 123 Commercial traveller (Morris saloon)
- 124 Estate Agent (54)
- 125 Police Sergeant (in his private car)
- 126 Solicitor
- 127 Doctor
- 128 Engineer (24)
- 129 Butcher (23)
- 130 Wholesale Confectioner (34)
- 131 Doctor
- 132 Police Constable (his car - another policeman driving it: a case of shared ownership?)
- 133 Builder
- 134 Bank Official
- 135 Actress
- 136 Doctor



**1937 (continued)**

- 137 Commercial Traveller
- 138 Doctor
- 139 Company Director
- 140 Doctor (Female)
- 141 Electrical Engineer
- 142 Garage Owner
- 143 Engineer
- 144 Salesman
- 145 Painter and Decorator
- 146 Florist
- 147 Shopkeeper
- 148 Salesman

**1938**

- 149 Biscuit Manufacturer (30)
- 150 Bus Conductor (£25 car. Lent to police constable to take his wife to Chester - conductor in court for not paying repair bill, sold car for £5)
- 151 Salesman
- 152 Traveller (29)
- 153 Traveller (51, six years driver)
- 154 Clerk of the Course at four race tracks (chauffeured)
- 155 Foreman Fitter (57, in car with wife and daughter 17)
- 156 Two Policemen in private car

**1939**

- 157 Clerk (24, driving 58 year old mother and 15 year old brother)
- 158 Painter and decorator (27)
- 159 Medical student
- 160 Coach Trimmer (8 years driver, brother living at same address was a motor mechanic)

(Sources: Various Manchester and National Newspapers)

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## **Manuscript Sources**

### **a) National Repositories**

#### **Public Records Office:**

MT 33 -  
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MT 34 -  
2/18/19/34/65/76/112/142/180/184/227/242/248/322/331/356/638

MT 39 -  
144/619/620/739

MT 900

HLG 51 -  
919/920

HLG 52 -  
545/547

### **b) Local Repositories**

**Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading -**

*Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) Files:*

*Motor Agents Association*

*CPRE file: Automobile Association, 78*

*CPRE file: AA Shelters and Telephone Boxes, 78/1*

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*Morris Board Minutes*

*Rover Board Minutes*

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**The Bodleian Library, Oxford -**

*The John Johnson Collection*

**The Museum of British Road Transport, Coventry -**

*Hillman Wizard Sales Campaign (1931)*

**Oral interviews**

Phil Hitchman (Acocks Green, Birmingham)

John Flitcroft (Lilleshall, Shropshire)

Tony Bird (Kingsclere, Berkshire)

William McKenzie (Myton Crofts, Warwickshire)

Janet Done (Coventry)

Sheila Anderson (Radcliffe-on-Trent, Notts)

Marjorie Clarke (St Helens)

Gay Parker (Bedworth, Warwickshire)

Leonora Wain (Scunthorpe)

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